



THE 3 INVESTIGATORS

CRIMEBUSTERS

ROUGH STUFF

High suspense,
high stakes—and
high-flying adventure



Three Investigators Crime Busters—03

ROUGH STUFF

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Chapter 1

Flying High

THE CESSNA HUMMED IN THE LATE MORNING SUNshine. Below the little plane, California's rugged Sierra Nevada range spread in a vast green sea of pine trees.

Bob Andrews looked out the cockpit window, binoculars to his eyes. Next to him, his father was piloting the single-engine turbo-prop high above the granite mountain tops and emerald valleys.

"There's something down there," Bob announced. "Just crossing that meadow. Spot it?"

Pete Crenshaw elbowed Jupiter Jones and winked. They were sitting in passenger seats behind Mr. Andrews and Bob. They had been gazing out their windows too, taking turns with the one pair of binoculars as they watched the changing mountain peaks below.

"Hey, that's a girl," Pete told Bob solemnly. "A gorgeous babe. She's gonna wave up at you any minute."

"Next she'll want your phone number," Jupiter said, grinning.

"And wonder if you're busy tonight," Pete added.

"Are there movies in Diamond Lake, Mr. Andrews?" Jupe asked innocently. "I think Bob's going to be busy. Pete and I'll need something to do."

Mr. Andrews chuckled.

Bob lowered the binoculars. "Actually, it was a cougar." He turned to look back at his friends. He was handsome, with tousled blond hair, dark blue eyes, and a magnetic smile. Wherever he went, girls seemed to appear...and to head right for him. "Very funny, but I'm not the one who's got to get a cheerleader's permission when I want a vacation."

"So who does?" Pete replied airily, conveniently forgetting the long explanation his girlfriend, Kelly Madigan, had extracted from him back home in Rocky Beach.

Bob turned to Jupe. "And when I'm out with a girl," Bob told him, "I don't bore her to death explaining the structure of the atom."

Jupe lifted his double chin and glared. "She said she

wanted to get down to basics!" he said hotly.

Mr. Andrews roared with laughter. Jupe turned red. It was only at that instant that Jupe realized what she had meant.

The three friends laughed loudly, although Jupiter's laughter was slightly embarrassed. For all his intelligence, girls were still a mystery to him.

Jupe stood up carefully. He did not exactly look like a rock star. He had a round face and straight black hair, and he wore a loose Foreign Legion fatigue shirt to hide his large waistline. Someday his constant dieting would pay off. Until then, "husky" was the way he liked to describe himself. It was more dignified than "fat."

The Cessna had a low ceiling. Jupe ducked and moved to the tail, where odds and ends of equipment were jumbled together.

"Jupe, what're you doing?" Pete asked.

"Looking for more binoculars," Jupe said. "I want to spot my own girl down there, one who already knows $E = mc^2$."

Once again hearty laughter filled the Cessna, and now Jupe laughed loudest of all. It was a good start for a summer weekend. The sun shone brightly. The sky was a clear, untroubled blue. And one, two, or maybe even three days of freedom stretched ahead of them, depending on how long Mr. Andrews' news story kept him at Diamond Lake.

Now that they were in the air, their jobs and responsibilities left behind in Rocky Beach, nothing could stop them. They were going to have fun in one of the most exclusive mountain resorts in California. Diamond Lake boasted a championship golf course, an Olympic-size swimming pool, tennis courts, saunas, a stable of horses, and catered camp outs. The resort even provided a landing strip for the planes of the glittering celebrities and wealthy executives who regularly escaped there.

Jupe rummaged noisily among the gear at the back of the plane. "With binoculars, maybe I'll spot 'Mr. Andrews' contact," Jupiter said jokingly as he picked up and discarded some mechanics' tools, an empty juice container, a battered Nerf ball, and other assorted junk. "What did you say his name was, Mr. Andrews?"

"I didn't say," Mr. Andrews responded immediately.

"Aha!" Jupiter said. "Your news source is a man. I said, 'his name' and you answered. That's our first clue, guys!"

"Nonsense," Mr. Andrews said, but he smiled. Jupe was

right.

"Come on, Dad," Bob urged. "Who is he? We won't tell anyone."

"Sorry." Mr. Andrews shook his head. He was a slender, good-natured man, a little under six feet, with big hands and feet. He was still a hair taller than his son, but probably not for long. He wore dark glasses, a Los Angeles Dodgers' baseball cap, and a navy blue Windbreaker with a half-dozen pencils sticking out of the breast pocket.

"What kind of story are you working on?" Pete asked. "Something about a super athlete? Somebody doing high-altitude training at Diamond Lake?" Pete, a natural athlete, was more into physical stuff than his friends. He was a tall, muscular guy whose strength had helped them out of many tight spots. "Hey, I know, a boxer! The state championship finals start next month!"

"You won't get even a hint from me. A reporter must protect his news sources," Mr. Andrews reminded them.

"Oh, do we know?" Bob sighed. "Without confidential sources," he continued, repeating the words he'd heard many times, "a reporter sometimes can't get the whole story."

"And if a reporter names his sources," Pete ended the familiar refrain, "they all dry up!"

"We know how important secrecy is," Jupe assured Mr. Andrews, "and you can count on us not telling anyone."

Mr. Andrews grinned. "You bet. You can't tell what you don't know!"

The three guys groaned. Mr. Andrews was tough. No wonder he was one of the top reporters for a major Los Angeles newspaper. There was no way he was going to reveal the story he was onto now.

At home the day before Bob had overheard him making arrangements to use one of the newspaper's small planes to fly to Diamond Lake on special assignment. Bob knew a hot tip was involved, but who, what, and why had eluded him.

"How'd I ever talk you into letting us come along?" Bob grumbled.

"Charm," Mr. Andrews said. "That same charm you turn on whenever there's a pretty girl within fifty feet." He shot his son a look of admiration, then said sternly, "And your sincere promise that you'd mind your own business. Remember, this is not a job for the Three Investigators."

The guys remembered. For years they had operated their

own semiprofessional detective agency—semiprofessional because they were underage and worked without state licenses and couldn't charge a fee. Still, they could never resist a mystery. At seventeen, they had already solved many baffling cases, explained a lot of odd happenings, and even brought some crooks and thieves to justice.

"Hey, give us a break. We're on vacation!" Pete assured Mr. Andrews.

"R & R," Jupe agreed. "Rest and relaxation."

"No," Pete corrected, "rest and recreation."

Bob turned around and grinned at them. "And women!" he kidded.

Jupiter lobbed the Nerf ball across the cabin. It hit Bob in the face with a plop.

Pete shoved Bob back down in his seat and held him there while the smaller guy struggled and hooted.

"Hey, I didn't give up three days' pay for this kind of abuse," Bob managed to say, laughing.

So he could make the trip, Bob had taken time off from his gofer job at the Rock-Plus talent agency. Pete had left the old Studebaker sedan he was fixing up for resale in the able hands of Ty Cassey, who was Jupe's cousin and a crack auto mechanic. And Jupe had printed out the complete inventory of the Jones Salvage Yard—two copies. The salvage yard was a family business run by Jupe's Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda. Jupe had entered the yard's entire contents into his computer, but whenever his uncle or aunt tried to use it, they invariably erased the file.

With the money they'd saved from their summer work, the guys could afford cots in Mr. Andrews' hotel room and simple meals. Lying around the hotel pool was free, and they hoped to find other interesting entertainment for the same low price.

"Hey, fellows," Mr. Andrews said, "this is worth looking at. See that valley?" He nodded ahead into the distance.

Bob peered through the binoculars, then handed them back to Pete. Both guys leaned forward, continuing to watch.

"Might as well go down for a closer look," Mr. Andrews said. "We're almost at Diamond Lake."

The plane's nose dipped, the engine humming rhythmically.

Jupe gave up trying to find more binoculars and moved back to his seat behind Mr. Andrews. He looked ahead at

the narrow green valley in the distance. It had tall, sheer granite walls and seemed to run almost straight north and south. At its southern end a cliff ran east and west for some miles to either side. A silvery waterfall cascaded down the cliff and out the valley.

"That's an awesome sight," Jupe agreed.

"What's that valley called?" Bob wondered.

"Wish I knew," Mr. Andrews said. "It's a beaut. Look on ahead. There's Diamond Lake, another forty or so nautical miles north of us."

Mercury and blue, almost round, Diamond Lake glistened like an alpine gem in the sunshine. Tiny ant-size buildings clustered on one edge. A white concrete road ribboned through the mountains and around its shore.

Bob whistled as he gazed at it. "All right!"

"And we'll be just in time for lunch!" Jupe exclaimed.

"Now you're talking," Pete agreed.

Just then, the Cessna gave a little jerk. Or at least Jupiter thought so. It was barely noticeable.

"Did you feel..." Jupe began.

Then time seemed to stop.

The three guys looked at one another and then forward to the Cessna's sole engine.

The comforting hum of the motor was gone. The engine was silent.

"Mr. Andrews..."

His hands were already speeding over the controls. He had his pilot's license for two years, had flown the newspaper's planes many times, had never had a problem.

He flipped switches, checked gauges, and stared for a moment, stunned, as nothing responded. The needles lay flat, didn't move. Numbers didn't register. Altitude, air speed, fuel..."

"The electrical system's out!" Bob realized.

"The engine?" Jupe asked, although he knew the answer.

"Dead," Mr. Andrews said. "We've got to head down before we stall out!"

Chapter 2

A Real Downer

THE CESSNA STREAKED THROUGH THE SKY, THE engine silent. The air whistled and groaned around it. Mr. Andrews grabbed the microphone from the instrument panel and pushed the button.

“Mayday! Mayday!” His voice was calm but urgent. “This is Cessna November 3638 Papa. Lost our engine. Going down. Position is 047 radial of Bakersfield VOR at 75DME!”

Mr. Andrews thrust the mike at Bob and returned to the stick.

Bob pushed the button and repeated. “This is Cessna November—”

Mr. Andrews suddenly paled. “Forget it, Bob,” he interrupted. “It’s too late.”

“What?” Bob asked, confused.

“The electrical system’s gone,” Jupe said, “so there’s no radio.”

“We’ve got an emergency locator beacon,” Bob remembered. “It goes on automatically if the airplane crashes.”

“I’d rather not crash, thank you,” Jupe said, his heart pounding. “If we can just reach the ground safely...”

“Yes,” Bob and Pete breathed.

Silently they tightened their seat belts.

“What’s the stall speed?” Jupe asked.

“About eighty miles per hour, this plane,” Mr. Andrews said tersely.

“What does that mean?” Pete asked worriedly.

“If we go too slow, we stall,” Jupiter said. Jupe’s round face was pinched. “We’ve got to keep the nose pointed down. So gravity’ll pull us faster than eighty.”

“If we stall,” Bob said grimly, “we drop like a rock.”

“Why don’t you sit on the nose, Jupe?” Pete tried to joke.

The guys smiled wanly but tension crackled in the small cabin. The plane’s nose was aimed at the granite peaks below. The craft seemed as fragile as a toy. If it hit one of those mountain tops, it would smash into match sticks. And they would too!

Fear knotted Jupiter’s stomach and doused him with

sweat.

Pete flexed his hands, cracking his knuckles. His muscles were so tight he wanted to jump out of his skin.

Bob swallowed, trying to breathe evenly. He promised himself he'd never again tease Jupe about his weight, or Pete about Kelly, if only they'd all survive.

"Where are we headed?" Bob asked. The words came out with a strangled sound.

"That meadow," Mr. Andrews said. It was big, located east of the valley they'd seen earlier.

"How long?" Jupe said.

"Three minutes. About."

The guys stared frozen out the windows. They couldn't stop watching as they sliced downward through the air. The trees and granite below grew bigger and bigger. The long cliff north of the meadow got taller, whiter, towering.

Bob thought about his mom. It would be terrible if she read about the crash in the papers. Dad and him dead.

The closer the plane got to the ground, the faster it seemed to go—rocketing at top speed into disaster!

"Duck down!" Mr. Andrews snapped. "Wrap your arms over your heads!"

"Dad—"

"You too, Bob. No heroics."

Bob leaned over and put his arms around his head. "At least we've got landing gear," he muttered, trying to reassure himself and the others. "The wheels are non retractable."

No one mentioned brakes. With the electrical system out, the brakes were unusable.

The rush of air around the plane grew louder.

This is it! Bob thought miserably.

The Cessna hit the earth.

Bob and the other guys slammed forward against their seat belts, then rammed back into their seats. Sharp pain shot red and white sparks behind Bob's eyes.

The plane leaped back up into the air and crashed down again with teeth-rattling force. It jerked all of them like puppets back and forth against their seat belts. The Cessna jumped up again.

"Hold on!" Mr. Andrews shouted.

The plane hit the ground a third time. It shuddered, bounced, and groaned. But it didn't rise again. It hurtled forward like a cannonball out of control.

Bob held on to his seat belt, trying to keep his head low as the terrific ground speed pitched him back into his seat. His insides felt like Jell-O. All of them were still alive, but for how much longer?

Suddenly there was the ear-splitting scream of metal wrenched from metal.

Bob, his dad, and the other guys slammed forward and lurched back. Their heads struck the side walls. Books and papers flew through the air. Electrical cords and pieces of equipment sailed past. Something hit Bob's arm. Pain registered in his brain. He could hardly breathe as the plane spun and wrenched from side to side.

And then there was silence. A stunned silence. The Cessna had stopped.

Slowly Bob raised his head.

"Dad!"

Mr. Andrews was slumped forward against the instrument panel.

Bob shook his father's shoulder. "Dad! Are you okay?" His father didn't move.

"Let's get him out of here!" Pete ordered as he stepped between the two front seats.

Quickly Bob unplugged Mr. Andrews' earphones. Pete released the unconscious pilot's seat belt. There was blood on Mr. Andrews' forehead, and a huge bruise that was already turning an angry red.

Bob stumbled out the door with Pete behind him, and ran around to the other side of the plane. He was okay, and Pete and Jupe seemed okay, but his father was hurt! He yanked open the pilot's door. Dad's still breathing he told himself eagerly.

Pete appeared at Bob's side. He scooped Mr. Andrews up into his strong arms, cradling him like a baby. Pete didn't have time to dwell on his own minor aches and pains. Mr. Andrews needed his help.

"Where's Jupiter?" Pete called to Bob as he ran toward the shelter of tall boulders. Bob ran alongside him, watching his dad with eagle eyes.

"Here." Jupe's voice was faint, groggy. He was still in the plane, and he felt lousy. Slowly he moved his arms and legs, testing them. They seemed to work okay..."

"Get out of there, you idiot!" Pete bellowed at him as he ran around some tall granite boulders.

Pete laid Mr. Andrews down on a patch of grass.

Bob leaned over him, feeling for the pulse in his neck. "Dad, can you hear me?" he said. "Dad?"

Pete raced back to Jupe.

"I'm coming," Jupe mumbled. He glared grumpily out the door at Pete.

"The fuel tanks!" Pete snapped, grabbing Jupe's arm.

Jupe's eyes opened wide. "The fuel tanks!" he repeated in horror. The engine would be red hot, and if the fuel tanks had ruptured...gas could leak onto it and ignite!

Jupe fell out the side door and scrambled to his feet. He didn't have time to test his body anymore. Either it would work or it wouldn't! He stumbled and began to run behind Pete. They headed toward the high boulders that shielded Mr. Andrews and Bob from the plane.

Jupe fell next to Mr. Andrews, panting, his round face glistening with sweat. Pete crouched beside Jupe.

Now they waited for the explosion, for the heat and oily stench of sudden fire.

Bob had taken off his denim jacket, rolled it up, and slipped it under his father's head. "His pulse is steady," he said, and looked at his two friends.

Jupe nodded. "Let's hope he's just been knocked out temporarily."

"He's a tough guy," Pete reminded Bob. He took off his own jacket, covered Mr. Andrews, and stood up. He stretched and swung his arms, then squatted back down to wait for the plane to explode...or the engine to cool. His back hurt from being thrown backward in his seat so many times, and his chest hurt a little from the seat belt, but he told himself it wasn't much worse than a workout at the gym.

Mr. Andrews moaned.

"Dad?" Bob said at once. "Wake up, Dad."

"Can you hear us, Mr. Andrews?" Jupe said.

Mr. Andrews' eyes opened and he looked at Bob.

Bob grinned happily. "Great landing, Dad."

"A real three-pointer," Jupe agreed.

"So, when do we start flying lessons?" Pete wanted to know.

Mr. Andrews smiled painfully. "You all okay?"

"Better than the plane, anyway," Jupe said.

Mr. Andrews started to sit up. Bob pushed him down.

"The plane!" Mr. Andrews exclaimed. "Did the wing come off?"

“The wing?”

The guys stood and looked around the boulders at the scene of destruction. A long earthen scar marked the plane’s progress across the flower-filled meadow. Shattered saplings stood upright in the sunshine, their tops severed by the Cessna’s wings. One four-foot propeller blade had snapped. It lay in pieces a hundred feet away. Two of the landing wheels rested on their sides in the Cessna’s tracks. And the starboard wing was ripped off, caught in the claw of the rock formation that had finally stopped the Cessna. Without its wing the plane would not fly out of the meadow—or anywhere.

“Wow,” Bob said.

“That was some landing,” Pete said with respect.

“And all I’ve got is a few bruises,” Jupe said with wonder.

“Where’s my cap?” Mr. Andrews said. Ignoring them, he grabbed the side of the boulder and pulled himself up.

“Dad!”

“Mr. Andrews!”

Mr. Andrews leaned against the boulder and held his head. He smiled ruefully. “Bit of a headache.”

“You’d better sit down!” Bob insisted.

“No way, fella,” Mr. Andrews said. “I’ve got to check out that plane.”

“But the engine...” Pete began.

“Might explode?” asked Mr. Andrews. “If it hasn’t yet, it probably won’t.” He turned toward the Cessna. Gingerly he put one foot in front of the other. “Not so bad,” he muttered.

Bob grabbed one arm to support him, and Pete grabbed the other.

“Anyone ever tell you you’re pigheaded?” Bob asked his dad.

“My city editor,” Mr. Andrews replied cheerfully. “All the time.” But he let the guys help him.

Jupe walked alongside them. When they got to the wrecked Cessna, Bob reached across the pilot’s seat and picked up Mr. Andrews’ sunglasses and Dodgers cap. Mr. Andrews tucked the sunglasses into the pocket of his blue Windbreaker. He turned the cap in his hands and tried it on the back of his head, away from the bump on his forehead. He adjusted it and grinned. He could wear it.

Now they surveyed the big downward-sloping meadow

and the thick forest that surrounded it. In the distance on three sides of them, high granite peaks gleamed in the sun. Behind them a long cliff rose two hundred feet and extended into the forest on either side of the meadow. The tall cliff blocked the peaks to the north from view.

There was no sign of civilization. Diamond Lake was thirty or forty miles away and out of sight somewhere on the other side of the cliff.

Bob studied the terrain. At any other time, he would have thought how great looking it was. The sharp, dramatic peaks stood over valleys covered with such thick trees that you couldn't see the ground. But now all he could think about was that they were alone. They were downed in a remote mountain meadow without water, food, radio, transportation, or camping gear.

"Well, fellows," Mr. Andrews said tiredly as if he could hear Bob's thoughts, "how are your wilderness skills?"

Chapter 3

California Tough

“JUST HOW COLD WILL IT GET?” BOB ASKED HIS father. They were sitting outside in the warm sunshine while Pete and Jupe searched the plane for a medical kit and a container to hold water.

“Not bad,” Mr. Andrews replied. “August is early for a freeze. Probably won’t drop below forty tonight.”

“Forty!” Bob’s eyebrows shot up. “That’s cold!”

“That’s my boy.” Mr. Andrews smiled. “A rough Californian through and through.”

“Hey, this is the land of nonstop rays,” Pete said as he hopped down from the plane and trotted toward them. He was holding a flat metal box in one hand.

“We’re genetically programmed for warmth!” Bob agreed.

Pete’s stomach rumbled loudly. “We’re also programmed to eat. I was looking forward to lunch in Diamond Lake,” he said ruefully. “A big lunch.”

Bob and Mr. Andrews nodded. They were hungry too.

“At least it’s good for Jupe’s diet,” Bob said.

“Whatever new one he’s trying today!” Pete laughed.

Mr. Andrews looked optimistic. “Well, with a little luck we’ll be out of here soon. Somebody’ll hear our Mayday beacon. It’s broadcasting right now on 121.5 megahertz.”

“You sure it’s on?” Pete asked, suddenly nervous.

“It’s automatic,” Mr. Andrews assured him. “Operates on a battery. It turns itself on at impact. I’ve heard stories that if you just accidentally drop one, there’s sometimes enough G-force to start it going.”

Mr. Andrews nodded at a faint white trail high in the blue sky above them. “That jet may be too far away to see us, but it can hear our SOS signal.”

Bob glanced at the faraway craft, then grinned at his father. He was relieved. They were in a bad spot, but his dad was talking so easily that he had to be feeling better. And they were going to be rescued.

“What’d you find, Pete?” he asked his friend.

“An emergency kit. Dusty, but all ours.”

“Dynamite!” Bob said.

They opened the metal box. Inside were aspirin,

biodegradable soap, bandages, mosquito repellent, skin antibiotic, iodine pills to purify water, a box of wooden kitchen matches, and six lightweight “space blankets” of a shiny material so thin that each folded compactly into a three-by-five-inch square.

“Matches!” Bob said triumphantly.

“Iodine pills,” Mr. Andrews said. “Now we’ll have safe drinking water.”

“This looks like the stuff astronauts wear,” Pete said as he shook out a space blanket. He tucked the edge into the neck of his T-shirt like a cape. “Hey, guys, look. Think I can pass for a rock star?”

With supplies from the emergency kit, Bob cleaned and bandaged Mr. Andrews’ forehead. The wound was superficial, but the bruised flesh had turned into a large, purple bump.

Bob studied the swollen flesh. “You’d better take it easy, Dad. Head wounds can be tricky. If you get dizzy, sit down...”

“I’m glad I sent you to those Red Cross classes,” Mr. Andrews said cheerfully.

“Me, too.”

Pete, his cape neatly folded again, ranged along the edge of the meadow gathering dry wood. He stacked it by the boulders where they had first found shelter. If they needed a fire, they’d build it away from the plane—and the fuel.

Jupe had been searching the Cessna for a water container.

“Hey, guys!” he shouted. His voice sounded worried. “We’ve got a problem!”

Bob and Pete ran to the plane, Mr. Andrews close behind.

“It’s the Mayday beacon,” Jupe announced grimly. “It’s not working.”

“Show me,” Mr. Andrews said curtly.

Jupe had opened the beacon box. “A little red light on the outside’s supposed to flicker. That’s how you know it’s signaling. The wiring and connections are okay. The only thing that could be wrong is the battery. Looks to me like it’s dead.”

“Dead?” Bob echoed miserably.

“Then it hasn’t sent any help signal?” Pete asked. His eyes were wide with shock.

“I don’t see how it could’ve,” Jupe said.

“Oh, boy,” Pete said. He opened and closed his fists. He

could feel his heart pumping with adrenaline. This was terrible!

"First the electrical system," Bob said, shaking his head. "Now this!" He felt a little sick.

"We're jinxed," Pete said.

"Electrical systems go out sometimes," Mr. Andrews said. "It's rare, but it happens. Faulty connections, for instance. And batteries sometimes don't get checked when they should. Which means they don't get replaced."

"This is the pits," Pete muttered.

There was nothing they could do. They climbed out of the plane. The afternoon wind whistled through the pines rimming the big grassy meadow. Behind them the cliff rose in easy levels toward the crystal-blue sky.

"Paradise," Bob said, and shook his head.

"Yes, it could fool you," Mr. Andrews said.

"Not me," Jupe said. "Poisonous snakes, avalanches, sharp precipices, forest fires, lightning, hungry carnivores, poisonous berries. Just to name a few problems." Jupe had never trusted the outdoors.

"Wait a minute," Bob said, his voice hopeful. "What about your contact in Diamond Lake, Dad? He'll think something's wrong when we don't show up on time."

"He didn't know you guys were coming," Mr. Andrews said. "Because I didn't know the last time I spoke to him. When I don't show up, he might call the paper. Otherwise it'll be three days before anyone back home starts to worry about us."

"Terrific," Pete muttered.

"Okay, Pete, you've gone camping before, right?" Mr. Andrews said. "What should we do first?"

"First we see what we've got," Pete said, rallying. "All I have is what I'm wearing." He was dressed in his usual jeans and tennis shoes. Today's T-shirt was black and had the name of the rock group Pink Floyd in big gold letters on the front. "Plus I've got a jacket, a pocketknife, and some extra clothes in my suitcase. What about you guys?"

"I guess I'm in the same boat," Bob said. His jeans were Calvin Klein, and his T-shirt had a Banana Republic Minister of Culture emblem. "But no knife."

"Me neither," Mr. Andrews said. He had on jeans, a shirt, his jacket and cap.

"Yeah, I wish I'd known I'd need backpacking gear," Jupe said. He sighed. "Three days aren't so bad, even though we

have to deal with the elements and not much to eat—”

“Hold on!” Bob said. “What’s this ‘not much to eat’ stuff? You’re holding out on us, otherwise you’d say nothing to eat! You’ve got food!”

Jupe’s round face flushed. “Well, not exactly.”

“Food!” Pete exclaimed. “Give!”

“You don’t have to short out your circuits!” Jupe said indignantly. “All you have to do is ask...”

“We’re asking!” Pete said.

“I could stand a bite,” Mr. Andrews admitted.

Jupiter shrugged. “Okay, but this won’t turn you on.” He disappeared into the plane.

“Hey, what’s taking you so long?” Pete demanded. “You got a microwave in there?”

Jupiter reappeared with his duffel. It was bright red with white stripes encircling each end and the words I came from pizza heaven, inc. printed on the sides. He pulled out a plastic bag of popcorn, a bag of unpopped kernels, and a variety of candy bars.

“Let me at it!” Pete announced. His stomach growled. “Give!”

“This is a diet?” Bob asked, incredulous. “And why aren’t you starving too? I bet you’ve got a stash in your pocket!”

“I am on a popcorn diet,” Jupe said stiffly, drawing himself up to his full portly height of five feet eight and three-quarter inches. “I must eat a cup of popcorn every two hours. I have just completed my scheduled snack.” Ceremoniously he reached into two enormous shirt pockets and brought out three more little bags of popped popcorn, about a cup each. He gave them to Pete, Bob, and Mr. Andrews. “It’s all yours.”

“And the candy bars?” Pete said, diving into his popcorn.

“Help yourself,” Jupe said archly.

“Some diet,” Bob said. “Candy bars.” He ate eagerly. He was definitely feeling better.

“It’s better than some of his other diets,” Pete said. “Remember the grapefruit and prunes?”

“Or the pancakes and French fries?” Bob said.

“How about that canned liquid stuff that smelled like gasoline?” Pete said.

He and Bob groaned, remembering.

“I must admit,” Jupe said thoughtfully, “that the carboliquid was particularly ineffective.” He smiled. “This diet, however, appears to have more salutary results.”

"What'd he say?" Pete asked Bob.

"He's cautiously optimistic," Bob replied.

Pete stared questioningly at Mr. Andrews.

Mr. Andrews grinned. "Jupe thinks he's maybe losing some weight." He put some popcorn in his mouth.

Pete shook his head. "Jupe, why don't you exercise? Go back to your judo class." He flexed his arms and twisted his athletic torso. "You'll lose weight and feel great."

Jupe leaned against the plane, looking pale. "Whenever I feel like exercising," he said, closing his eyes, "I lie down and wait for the urge to go away."

They laughed. Jupiter opened his eyes and smiled broadly. He had flexed, exercised, and trained his brain into a finely tuned instrument. That was good enough for him.

"Thanks for the food, Jupe," Mr. Andrews said. "Divide it up for three days. But remember, we could be here longer."

"Let's look for help," Pete said. "Maybe there's a ranger cabin around here. Or a campground or road. We need water, no matter what. When I was gathering wood, I heard a stream running over there somewhere." He pointed southwest. "And campgrounds are usually on streams."

"You can use this to carry water," Jupe said. He reached into the Cessna and retrieved a two-quart plastic bottle that had once held orange juice.

"Good," Pete said, and handed it to Bob. "Wash it out with the soap, fill it with clean water, and drop in the iodine pills to make it safe to drink."

Bob took the water bottle from Pete. "No problem. What're you going to do?"

"I saw a trail in the woods south of here. It's probably an animal path. But who knows?"

"Good thinking, Pete," Mr. Andrews said. "I'll climb the cliff." He nodded toward the granite wall that ran along the northern edge of the meadow. The cliff rose in easy-to-climb mounds. "From the top, I ought to be able to see a long way. Maybe I'll spot a fire lookout."

"You feel okay enough to do that, Dad?" Bob asked.

"Like you said, son. No problem."

Now Mr. Andrews, Pete, and Bob looked expectantly at Jupiter.

"Well," Jupe said. "Guess I'll stick around here. Just in case we're rescued."

"We need more wood," Pete told him. "Wet wood, so we can build a big, smoky signal fire. And then you could get

some shirts out of our suitcases. Climb three or four trees and tie the shirts to the top like flags.”

As Pete talked, Jupiter seemed to wilt with exhaustion. Bob had a sudden image of their overweight friend perched on the top of a pine tree, like an oversize Christmas ornament. He cracked up.

“And after that,” Pete continued cheerfully, “roll some rocks into the middle of the meadow and spell out SOS real big in case a plane flies low enough to read it.”

Jupiter groaned. “You want me to build a log cabin while I’m at it?” The others laughed.

“All right, all right,” Jupe said. “I’ll pick up some wet wood.”

“Lots!” Pete said, and he and Bob took off.

“Remember to use landmarks!” Mr. Andrews called after them. “It’s easy to get turned around in the forest!”

Bob and Pete separated at the meadow’s edge. Bob plunged southwest into the pine forest, heading toward the faint sound of rushing water. Pete disappeared southeast into the forest on the animal trail he had discovered earlier.

Remembering his father’s words, Bob carefully watched where he was going. He passed an unusual triple pine—three trees that had begun growing together as saplings and now formed a single thick trunk of three irregular cylinders. Later he passed a flat boulder with deep bowl-like indentations. It looked as if ancient Indians had ground nuts into flour there with stone pestles. He saw other landmarks and committed the sequence to memory, until at last he found an animal path. He followed the path toward the sound of the stream. The rushing water grew louder and louder.

And then he saw it, a shallow river about twenty feet wide. The water pounded over rocks, twigs, and a pebble-strewn bed. Sunlight sparkled on parts of it, while other parts, deep in the shadows of trees, were almost black. The stream was crystal clear and looked perfect for drinking.

Bob washed out the orange juice bottle with the biodegradable soap that had been in the plane’s emergency kit. Then he rinsed it, filled it with water, and dropped in the iodine pills.

He stood and looked up and down the stream. His next assignment was to find help—a campground would be most likely. Upstream or down?

He thought about the valley they had seen from the

plane. He knew it was west of the meadow, and that it had a stream running through it. This could be the same stream. If his calculations were right, the valley would be due north of where he now stood. It was very likely that such a beautiful valley would have a public campground in it.

Bob headed upstream, sometimes able to walk along the water and at other times going inland to circle past boulders, prickly brush, or marshes. As he moved, the sound of rushing water grew louder.

At last he stepped around a stand of red manzanita trees and out to an open space where the stream swept down over rapids. Spilling into the rapids was a long, sheer waterfall. The sight was extraordinary. The churning water roared like a million bumblebees.

Bob breathed in the misty air. He gazed up at the waterfall and up, up at the dramatic cliff that rose high above it on either side. The falls had cut a deep notch in the rock face.

If this was the waterfall Bob had seen from the plane, then the valley should be just beyond the cliff. He needed to climb that wall of rock. The question was where to start.

Bob studied the granite face and spotted a place where the stone separated, forming a foothold. He put down his water bottle, stepped carefully over a huge pile of rock debris, and started up the cliff. Stones spun away from his feet. He climbed slowly, gripping little outcroppings and tree roots.

And then it happened.

From above, a few small rocks pelted down on his head. He heard a rumble.

He looked up. A big rock was coming down to his right, gathering debris with it. A landslide was racing down to crush him!

Chapter 4

Double Trouble

ON THE CLIFF ABOVE BOB, THE LANDSLIDE GAINED momentum. He couldn't go back, he'd be smack in the path of the rock. Fear tightened his throat. No time for thinking. Time to move!

He scrambled left, hugging the face of the cliff. Sweat ran down his forehead and burned his eyes. Rock dust clogged his nose.

He frantically edged sideways.

The rumble grew.

The landslide exploded past him. Tiny stones stung his skin like needles.

The big slide dumped onto the loose rocks at the base. That enormous pile was talus, Bob realized, formed by centuries of landslides just like this one. The cliff was unstable. Anything could have set it off—a mountain lion, an earth tremor, or just a rock that erosion had finally worked loose. The cliff wasn't safe for climbing!

Bob's heart pounded. He closed his eyes, still feeling the terror of the near miss.

But he couldn't stay there forever.

He opened his eyes and looked around. What should he do? Go up? Go back down?

And then he saw a strange sight. Handholds—or footholds. No, both! And they were carved! No natural phenomenon could have created such a perfect set of individual shelves for the feet and curved grips for the fingers.

Still a little shaky, Bob stepped from the crack to which he clung and into the security of the handholds and footholds. Now he could see there were many of them. They extended in a tidy but dangerous path, angling upward to the left on the face of the sheer cliff. They were carved in what appeared to be a stable section, perhaps by the same long-ago Indians who had ground bowls into the granite boulder he'd passed earlier.

Bob looked at his watch. It was getting late. The others would be waiting for him.

He crawled on, staying in the handholds and footholds as

he moved upward along the cliff. He reached the notch above the falls and continued around the corner into a deep, eroded channel, moving upstream. The cold spray from the waterfall beneath him misted the air.

And there it was opening up before him—the beautiful valley they had seen from the air. It was forested and wide in places, and extended farther than he could see. The cliffs that rimmed it were pale granite and sparkled in the sun. The stream flowing through its center was flat and peaceful, far different from the torrent that spilled over the waterfall and rapids. But the campground he had hoped to find wasn't there.

The wind was blowing from the north. It carried the stench of sulfur, which meant there were probably hot springs in the valley. For a moment Bob's eyes stung, irritated. He turned his head away, and then back again for a final view.

It seemed very long ago that he, Jupe, Pete, and his father had spotted the valley from the air. So much had happened since then. They were lucky to be alive. If it hadn't been for his father's sharp piloting when the electrical system went out...

He stopped the thought and turned away to follow the handholds and footholds back down the channel, around the corner, and onto the cliff face. He passed the place where the landslide had almost caught him, then crossed a narrow ledge where thick bushes grew. After several hundred feet, the holds started down the cliff again.

For some reason the Indians had not wanted anyone to know about their secret way into the valley. When the path was low enough to be visible from the ground, it was far from the open space around the rushing stream and hidden by the thick pine forest.

Bob stepped from the cliff to the forest floor. He looked at his watch again. Now he really was late!

He sped back to the water bottle, picked it up, and raced along the animal trail through the forest. At last he left the trail to follow in reverse the landmarks he'd memorized.

When he glimpsed the meadow where the Cessna had crash-landed, it was about an hour to sundown. He was exhausted, but excited. Wait till he told the other guys what he'd survived!

When Bob and Pete separated, Pete had followed the animal path he'd discovered while gathering wood. It led, as

Pete had suspected, southeast into the dense pine forest.

Sunshine filtered through the tall branches, casting warm light and cool dark shadows. Overhead, the tree tops touched, occasionally blocking the sky. The air was aromatic with the rich smells of pine and earth.

Pete continued on the dirt path for a half hour, watching for human tracks. He saw deer, raccoon, and cougar prints, also deer and bear scat. But disappointingly, no prints from hiking boots or tennis shoes. He'd hoped for the smell of campfire smoke, the sound of a Jeep revving up, the sight of a telephone pole. But there was nothing.

Except, suddenly, the sense that someone was moving toward him from behind, parallel to the path and at great speed. Someone or some animal.

He heard rustlings.

He stopped on the trail and listened, all his senses razor alert. He stepped quietly off the path. He stood behind a tree, watching.

The rustlings came closer—almost opposite him.

And they passed by.

Just like that, the faint sounds moved beyond Pete, speeding on into the forest. Pete saw nothing.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Who—or what!—was out there?

“Hey!” Pete yelled. He figured that if it was an animal, the shout would make it panic and run. “Stop!” A person would stop to find out who was shouting, and why.

Pete listened. Nothing bolted. Nothing tore panic-stricken through the trees. But the rustling sounds continued to move steadily away as if he'd never called out.

Pete ran after the sounds. His legs stretched and ate up the trail. He had an athlete's body, with an athlete's need for activity. It felt great to be moving.

He slowed and listened. There they were—the same faint sounds.

He raced off the path and plunged into the forest. Pine needles brushed his face.

And then he saw it—a figure. A person. It was a male, almost invisible as he moved steadily through the dark shadows of trees.

“Stop!” Pete bellowed, running after the ghostly figure. “I want to talk to you! We need help!”

The figure seemed to hesitate, lose a beat in his slow, paced running. And then he speeded up. He disappeared

into the darkest tree shadows.

Pete tore after him. What kind of person wouldn't answer when he was asked for help? Swiftly Pete rounded the stand of trees.

The ghostly figure was gone. Vanished. This guy—or ghost!—was a real creep.

Pete stood still to watch and listen. Nothing. Either the guy had suddenly levitated or he was hiding.

"All I want to do is talk!" Pete called. "My friends and I are lost!" He waited.

Nothing.

"We won't hurt you..."

Silence. I'll find him, Pete thought.

He began exploring the nearby shadows and trees.

Suddenly he remembered the time. He looked at his watch. It was late. He needed to get back.

But where was back?

What an idiot, he told himself angrily. He wasn't even sure where the path was! Like a fool, he'd forgotten to watch for landmarks.

Pete had a terrible sinking feeling in his stomach as he realized what he'd done.

He was lost!

Chapter 5

Missing Persons

PETE BREATHED SLOWLY. HEY, CALM DOWN, HE told himself. You got here. Now figure out how to get back!

He looked again at his watch. He moved to a spot where the tree tops opened enough to give a clear view of the sun's position.

He calculated. He'd been headed southeast when he followed the trail from the meadow. The sun had been on his right shoulder. The sun was lower now. For him to head northwest, it would be low on his left side, almost on his chest.

Locating the meadow again in this vast, timbered terrain might be impossible, but he had to try.

Pete moved carefully, checking the sun's position. Birds sang, and the wind ruffled the trees. Small animals scooted away from his footsteps.

He walked for an hour. I don't recognize a thing, he told himself with dismay. Not a single landmark!

The sun was even lower, perhaps an hour to sundown, when he again heard sounds of movement in the forest. He started to call out, then decided not to. The last time I tried that, he thought, the guy got away.

Quietly he padded after the sounds.

They were leading him north, and they were far noisier than those of the first ghost he'd heard.

He must be crazy! He should be getting back to the meadow, not getting himself even more lost!

The sounds stopped.

Pete hesitated only a moment. He barreled through the forest toward them.

And skidded to a stop, shocked.

"Bob!" Pete cried, astounded.

Bob looked back. "How's it going, Pete?" He smiled.

Pete laughed. It was great to find someone who answered you! He lowered his shoulders and turned on the speed.

"Whoa!" Bob shouted, laughing.

Pete slammed into Bob's midsection and carried him into the grassy meadow.

"Hey, I just ran into somebody I know!" Pete said. "You!"

He roared with laughter.

Bob pushed him off. He shook his head, grinning. "You're nuts. Anyone ever tell you that?"

"You, just now," Pete said.

Pete threw a sweaty arm over Bob's shoulder. They walked toward the Cessna and exchanged reports.

"A landslide!" Pete said. "You could've been totaled!"

"And what about you?" Bob retorted. "A forest ghost gets you lost!"

They shook their heads at their bad luck.

"Look, Jupe's done better than us," Bob said, pointing ahead. "That smoke's dark enough to get the attention of any fire lookout!"

Jupiter was sitting next to a smoky fire. The afternoon was growing cold, and he now wore his jacket zipped to the chin. He'd carried their duffels from the plane and set up a makeshift camp. The ground was scraped free of duff-decaying leaves, grass, and other flammable materials—within a six-foot radius of the fire. Fresh pine boughs, piled nearby, waited to be arranged into beds.

"That was some tackle," Jupe observed as Bob and Pete approached.

"Pete was just glad to see me," Bob explained.

Jupe narrowed his eyes at Pete's muscular frame. "Well, I hope he's not that glad to see me!"

"Would you rather I kiss you?" Pete said.

"You do, and your lips'll shrivel up and fall off!" Jupe promised.

The three guys laughed loudly. Bob and Pete put on their jackets and stood close to the fire, warming their hands and telling Jupe about their adventures. It was really getting cold now.

Bob was looking around. "Where's Dad?"

"Still gone," Jupe said.

"He should've been back long ago," Bob said worriedly. He stared up at the cliff and thought about the ugly wound and bruise on his dad's head. He started to run.

"Hey, wait for me!" Pete said, following.

Jupe sighed. Someone had to stay and watch the fire. Untended campfires could start forest fires. This time he would've liked to have gone with Pete and Bob. He was worried about Mr. Andrews too.

Pete looked at the western sky. Only about a half-hour remained until sunset. Daylight would last a little after that,

and then darkness.

Bob scrambled up the cliff. The rock was solid, not exposed to the same intense erosion as the cliff around the waterfall. Also, the granite rose in mounded, easy-to-climb layers. They were so smooth that they were sometimes slippery, the result of polishing by glaciers thousands of years ago.

At the top, Pete and Bob stood on the edge. They breathed heavily.

Bob looked anxiously around. "I don't see him," he said.

"Maybe he's sitting on a rock somewhere. Resting," Pete replied.

Below them was the view Mr. Andrews had climbed to see. Timbered mountains stretched for hundreds of miles in green accordion pleats. The low sun cast long shadows, turning valleys into black pits and peaks into golden embers. There was no sign of a fire tower.

They turned, surveying the cliff top. It was a long, mostly flat plateau of granite, with giant boulders and rocks scattered around. Occasional scrub trees forced their way from the rock, struggling to survive. One place on the plateau looked much like another. North of it, a half mile or so away, big pines grew thickly. It was another forest. It climbed uphill to a long ridge that stretched across the horizon. Somewhere on the far side of that ridge was Diamond Lake. Bob and Pete split up. "Dad!"

"Mr. Andrews!" "Dad!"

A cold, stiff wind swept across the barren plateau. Bob shivered. Where was his dad? He wouldn't have left the area without telling someone first.

And then he saw it. His dad's blue Dodgers cap. "Dad!" he hollered. He ran to the cap lying next to a skeletal manzanita bush. "Dad!" He had to be near. "Where are you?"

"Hey, what'd you find?" Pete asked, running up to him.

Bob showed him. "He loves this dumb cap. He wouldn't lose it. Something bad's happened. I know it. He's gotten sick. Or dizzy and confused. Or lost." "Let me see," Pete said. He turned the Dodgers cap in his hands, examining it. "Looks okay." It wasn't torn, dirty, or bloody. "Dad!" Bob called again.

"Hey, he could've just accidentally dropped it." Bob shook his head stubbornly. "This is his lucky cap."

Pete picked up fist-size stones. "I'm going to build a

pyramid so we can remember where you found it. You keep looking.”

Bob nodded and moved off.

Pete glanced at the sun’s bright orange glow. It was setting. Quickly he finished the pyramid, a universal marker for woodsmen and explorers. He continued searching. He didn’t want Bob to know how worried he was.

Bob and Pete cupped their hands and called. The wind seemed to blow their shouts away. They looked behind enormous boulders, in the shadows of straggly trees, and down dark crevices where the granite plateau had separated during massive earth movements.

“We’ve got to go back!” Pete yelled at last.

“Not yet!” Bob protested. He moved closer to the forest that rimmed the plateau’s north side, searching.

“Come on!” Pete bellowed. “Your dad would want us to go back!”

“No!” His father was nearby. Bob knew it!

“He’d be furious if we got lost too!” Pete shouted.

Bob stopped. His shoulders slumped.

“The sun’s setting!” Pete insisted. “We won’t be able to see anything!”

Bob turned, defeated by logic. But he wouldn’t give up. Tomorrow I’ll be back, he promised himself.

They trudged along the edge of the cliff until they found the place where they had climbed up. They descended, the last rays of light streaking across the indigo sky. The rising moon was almost full, but it didn’t cast enough light to continue the search.

They hurried over the grassy meadow, shivering, to the camp Jupe had built. It was dark now. The firelight made a warm circle.

“No luck?” Jupe asked.

“Just his cap,” Pete said.

Pete told Jupe what they’d seen. Bob sat down on a rock and stared dejectedly into the fire.

Jupe raised his eyebrows at Pete. Pete nodded. They needed to cheer up Bob.

“Hey,” Pete said suddenly, “I hear the Hot Pistons are really dynamite.” He was referring to a rock group managed by the talent agency Bob worked for.

“Oh, they’re all right, I guess,” Bob said, distracted.

“Yeah,” continued Jupe, “what’s their new single?”

“Low to the Ground,” Pete answered. “How does it go,

Bob?"

"Look, guys..."

"C'mon Bob, it's dark and the rustlings are making me nervous," Pete lied.

"Well... 'Cruisin' in my Chevy down the Coast Highway..." Bob began.

The other two Investigators chimed in and pretty soon raucous verses about low-slung hot rods and burning rubber filled the night air. Pete picked up a branch and started playing it like an electric guitar. Much to the amazement and delight of his friends, Jupiter tried to dance to the music for a while, gyrating his well-padded hips. Then, bright red in the face, he switched to drumming on a log instead. Bob was swept up in the hilarity of his pals' antics and for a time forgot the gloomy thoughts about his father.

After a few more hit songs, the guys started to get ready for bed.

"Take off the shirt you're wearing," Pete told them, "and put on all your other shirts. You don't want that moisture next to your skin."

Jupe grumbled about the cold but knew Pete was right—the temperature would drop even more during the night and the fire might go out.

As soon as the guys had zipped their jackets on over their dry shirts, Pete ordered, "Now do the same with your socks. Don't put back on what you wore today. Wet socks will wick off your body heat."

Making faces at each other's aromatic feet, Bob and Jupe did as Pete said. Then they tucked their shirts inside their jeans and their jeans inside their socks to keep out drofts.

Jupe got the night's popcorn and candy bars from the plane and handed them around. The guys ate. They then arranged the pine boughs into thick, springy mattresses.

Pete put the empty popcorn sacks back in the plane. "If you leave trash around," he said, "you get visitors. Wild animals can smell food on plastic or paper. They'll come looking for a feast. Next thing you know, they think you're the feast."

The guys wrapped themselves in their Mylar space blankets and lay down around the fire. The high orange and blue flames licked the black, starry sky.

They closed their eyes. They needed to be rested and alert tomorrow. They were going to find Mr. Andrews—first thing!

A thought struck Jupiter out of nowhere. "Hey, Bob," he mumbled drowsily. "What about your contact lenses?"

"No sweat, Jupe," Bob replied. "They're extended wear lenses. I don't have to take them out for another week."

"And we'll be outta this meadow before those lenses are outta your eyeballs," Pete said.

With a laugh, the Three Investigators settled down for the night.

Pete and Jupe both drifted into an uneasy sleep, but not Bob. He opened his eyes and looked at the Big Dipper, Ursa Major. "Wherever you are, Dad," he whispered softly, "don't worry. We're going to find you!"

Bob closed his eyes. An owl hooted. Coyotes howled. An animal moved through the trees. He thought he heard the faint rumble of a truck on a distant mountain road. At night sounds traveled farther, and people imagined things.

He breathed deeply. He wasn't helping his dad or himself by lying rigidly awake. Slowly he relaxed. At last weariness took hold and he fell into a heavy, restless sleep, thinking, where is he?

Chapter 6

The Ghost Runner

THE SUN ROSE PALE AND COOL OVER THE EASTERN slopes. The guys got up immediately, stamping their feet and rubbing their hands. The fire was just coals. None of them had fed it during the night. Their space blankets and layers of clothing had kept them warm.

"We didn't have a freeze," Bob said. "That's good for Dad."

They ate the last of the cooked popcorn for breakfast. They'd save the candy bars for that night. They spread their space blankets over bushes to dry in the sun and took off their extra socks and shirts.

Bob emerged from the Cessna with a small spiral-bound notebook. "Dad's," he explained. "It's got yesterday's date on the first page, and a man's name—Mark MacKeir. Know him?"

"No," Jupe and Pete answered together.

"Maybe he was the guy Dad was going to meet," Bob said. "It's the right date, and it's the only notebook Dad brought." He put it into his jacket pocket, and the three of them headed up the meadow to the cliff.

Bob climbed the granite first and stood waiting for the others next to the pyramid marker. His hands rested on his hips and he held his chin up as he surveyed the barren, rock-strewn area. Wearing his father's blue cap, he looked like a younger, slimmer version of his dad.

"Okay," he said decisively, "we're going to spread out from the marker again. Pete and I covered this area last night." His arm swept in an arc. "I'm going to head farther north, toward the trees. You guys go left and right. We'll meet back here in an hour, okay?"

The three friends checked their watches and then separated to search among the rocks and huge boulders. They called Mr. Andrews' name and plodded over the hard surface, unwilling to pass even a crevice without checking.

They covered a lot of territory. When each returned, he had high hopes that even though his luck had been bad, one of the others had found Mr. Andrews. Or Mr. Andrews had found them.

But their luck wasn't bad—it was terrible.

The rock pyramid that marked where Bob had found Mr. Andrews' Dodgers cap was gone.

"Where is it?" Pete said with wonderment.

They walked slowly over the gray granite.

"It was here," Bob said.

"No, there," Pete said.

"You're both wrong," Jupe said. "It was right here.

I remember this circular moss stain on the granite. I know this is where we started searching."

He bent down, picked up a cigarette butt, and held it up. "Look. See how white the paper is? This couldn't have been here long. And it sure wasn't here when we started this morning. I would've seen it, and so would you."

"What're you saying?" Pete said, his eyes narrowed.

"He's saying we've had a visitor," Bob said thoughtfully. "Someone who smokes. Someone who destroyed our marker. Someone who sneaked around us or maybe just missed us. We were pretty spread out. And it would've been easy to stay out of sight behind all these big boulders."

"Just vandalism probably." Jupe examined the cigarette. A thin emerald band encircled the white paper next to the long filter. "Looks expensive." He dropped it into one of his voluminous shirt pockets.

"We'd better get moving," Bob decided. "Dad's not here. I vote we explore where Pete was yesterday. He saw somebody. Maybe it was Dad."

"Doubt it," Pete said.

"It could've been," Bob said reasonably. "You didn't get a good look. If Dad hit his head again, he could've gotten so confused that he wandered down there."

"But if it was your dad, why didn't he answer me when I yelled?" Pete said.

Nobody had an answer for that one.

"At least we can find whoever was there. And maybe get hold of the forest service," Bob urged. "They can cover a lot more territory than we can."

Jupe and Pete looked at each other and nodded. It made sense. The forest service had the equipment and manpower to make a really thorough search.

They stopped back in camp. The coals looked dead, but Jupe threw dirt on them just in case. Pete and Bob rolled stones into a big SOS in the middle of the meadow. They filled their pockets with popcorn kernels and candy bars.

Bob got the water bottle.

“Space blankets too,” Pete told them. “And the rest of the stuff in the emergency kit. I got turned around once down there. Let’s go prepared for the worst.”

Bob and Jupe nodded. Bob wished his dad had a blanket the night before.

Sunshine filtered through the tall tree tops, sprinkling bright globes of light among the cool forest shadows. Bob, Jupe, and Pete hiked single file over the narrow trail that Pete had covered alone the day before. Bob, still wearing the Dodgers cap, watched everywhere for his dad.

They were entering a clearing when they heard a plane flying overhead.

“Oh, no!” Jupiter said.

They ran to the center of the clearing and waved their arms at the plane streaking high in the sky.

They shouted. Pete whipped his silvery space blanket out of his jacket pocket and swung it frantically.

Bob and Jupe did the same. In his frustration, Bob leaped up and down. He needed help to find his father!

“We’re down here!”

“Look down here!”

But the plane continued on, growing smaller and smaller.

“Maybe they saw our SOS!” Bob said, his voice full of hope.

But they all knew the plane was so high it probably hadn’t.

Bob walked off down the path. “We’ll just have to find Dad ourselves.”

Determined, the three friends resumed hiking.

Pete’s stomach rumbled. So did Jupe’s.

“Hunger in stereo,” Pete quipped.

Bob smiled. “You guys are weird.”

Pete suddenly stopped, pressing a finger to his lips. He looked left through the pine boughs.

Bob followed Pete’s glance. Distant branches moved in the shadows. Dad! There was a faint rustling. At last he saw the cause—a slender, wiry figure in a vest and pants moving swiftly from shadow to shadow. Bob was deeply disappointed. It wasn’t his father.

Pete pointed to the trail so Jupe and Bob would know he wanted them to stay on it. And then he was gone, melting among the trees.

Jupe and Bob sped off along the path, trying to keep pace

with Pete. They heard off-trail rustlings and sighted Pete occasionally, but never again saw the figure he chased.

Pete slipped in and out among the trees, following the perpetual motion of the person. It was the same guy, Pete was sure. Pete ran soft-footed, better at it today than yesterday. The hunter and the quarry raced on until Pete saw the guy's rhythm break. He'd spotted Pete.

The guy took a sharp right, tearing around a large clump of trees, trying to lose Pete just as he had yesterday.

But this time Pete bore left, circling the clump on the opposite side. When he'd almost rounded it, he stopped abruptly. Slowly he turned. His eyes almost popped out of his head.

Pete was staring directly into the shining black eyes of a young man about his own age.

He was an Indian in a dark leather vest and jeans.

The guy stood stock still in the blackest part of the tree's shadow. He was so silent and immobile that he might have been a tree himself. Not a muscle in his face moved, not even his eyes.

Pete breathed hard. "Hey, we need some help..." he began.

The Indian's mouth remained closed. Fast as the wind, he rotated on one heel, burst from his frozen position, and dashed almost soundlessly away over the forest duff.

Pete chased after him, but the trees seemed to swallow the guy. The Indian was the fastest runner Pete had ever seen.

Pete raced on, more and more convinced the chase was hopeless, more and more angry that the Indian had refused to talk, to help.

Meanwhile, Bob and Jupe continued along the trail, moving briskly. Bob set the pace, and Jupe panted behind. It seemed an endless trek, especially during the long periods when Pete was out of sight.

And then Pete suddenly appeared on the trail a hundred feet ahead of them, breathing hard. His red-brown hair was tousled and his strong face glistened with sweat.

"Did you see him?" Pete asked as Bob and Jupe ran up.

"Who?"

"The Indian guy!"

"What?" Bob said, astounded.

"It looks like I've lost him for sure," Pete said. "Let's keep moving."

The little group pressed on along the forest path, following the rise and fall of the gently rolling mountain slope. Pete told them what had happened.

"So he kept heading in this direction," Bob said thoughtfully.

"Makes you kind of wonder what's ahead," Pete added.

"All I can say," Jupe said miserably, "is that I hope whatever it is, it's not far!"

They rested five minutes for Jupe's benefit and then resumed their dogged hike.

The sun rose past its midmorning position, slowly heating the forest. Butterflies floated by. Blue jays screeched. The dense smells of pine and sweat mingled in the new warmth.

Impatient and restless, Pete strode ahead and then waited for Bob and Jupe to catch up. After the third time he shouted for them to hurry.

"What is it?" Bob said when he sighted Pete.

"It better be good," Jupe added grumpily.

"It is!" Pete hollered. "How does a road strike you?"

Bob and Jupe hurried to Pete, who stood on the edge of a narrow, rutted dirt road. It came out of the trees from the northeast and vanished back into the forest to the southwest. It wasn't much, but it was marked with fresh tire tracks.

"I don't remember seeing a road here from the air," Bob said.

"By the time we got in the vicinity," Jupe reminded him, "we weren't doing much sightseeing. We were getting ready to crash!"

They looked up and down the road, which was overhung by bushes and trees and was about the width of a car and a half.

"Downhill." Jupe was following what his tired legs were telling him.

"Okay by me," Pete said.

"Let's move," Bob urged. Somewhere nearby was help to find his dad. He had to get to that help.

They went downhill. Soon the road angled more sharply west.

The dirt was dry and hard-packed. They guessed the deep ruts had been formed during autumn and spring rains. In the winter the ground would be frozen solid and under several feet of snow.

The guys walked side by side, spaced out across the top

of the ruts where the earth was fairly smooth. They were tired and hungry. They talked little, concentrating on their hiking. Birds flew through the tree tops. The sun climbed higher.

The noise started almost as a little echo. They looked at one another, wondering what it was. As they continued down the road, it became recognizable—the sounds of people, dogs, children.

The noise wasn't loud enough for a city or even a town, but it meant people—at last!

The three guys hurried. Bob started to smile.

The road swung around a wide bend. At the end was a cluster of ramshackle wood huts, old trailers, and prefab cabins scattered amid a grove of towering redwood trees. Outside the houses stood fishing tackle, hunting gear, pens of chickens, frames with hides stretched for drying, and very old, battered pickup trucks and Jeeps that looked as if they should have been retired years ago.

It was a small Indian village. Two children dressed in shorts and T-shirts looked up from their play to gape at Bob, Jupe, and Pete. They had red eyes and runny noses. The brown dog next to them jumped up to sniff the three guys' athletic shoes.

The village was humming with activity. Women and children started gathering in a central area. A drum began to beat.

"You!" Pete suddenly yelled. "Stop!"

Pete took off, running behind one of the cabins. He grabbed the shoulder of a young Indian who wore a leather vest and jeans. He spun the fellow around roughly, jerking him off balance. The guy glared at Pete with a ferocious expression on his face.

"You!" Pete glared back. "You're the one we've been chasing!"

Chapter 7

Sick People

“WHAT KIND OF GUY ARE YOU!” PETE DEMANDED of the Indian youth. “Running off like that!” The Indian did a double take. With his straight black hair, piercing black eyes, and slightly curling lip, he looked ferocious. But then he recognized Pete. His eyes widened in astonishment. Then his expression softened and his white teeth flashed in a smile. “How’d you get here?” he asked Pete. “Did you track me? No. No, of course not. Hey, you found us! I would’ve gone back for you, soon as I could. Sorry I had to leave you behind.”

It was Pete’s turn to look amazed. “What do you mean, you had to?” Pete asked.

“Let me explain,” the young man went on pleasantly. He straightened the short leather vest that he wore over his old, faded jeans. His belt buckle was unusual and beautiful—a large silver oval with a turquoise stone in the center. He touched the silver buckle and said, “I’ve been on a vision quest...” Just then Jupiter and Bob caught up with them.

“My name’s Daniel Grayleaf,” the young Indian said politely. “I—”

“Do you have a telephone?” Bob blurted out. “We have to reach the forest service. Our plane crashed, and now my dad’s lost. We can’t find him anywhere!”

Daniel shook his head. “Sorry. No telephones here, or even radios. We drive out when we need something.”

“Then could you take us to the nearest ranger station?” Bob asked.

“No one leaves now,” said a deep, raspy voice behind the three visitors. “Who are these strangers?”

The Investigators turned and saw a man of medium height, sturdy and muscular, with broad features. His eyes were red-rimmed and watery.

“Uncle, these are the ones I told you about,” said Daniel.

“You didn’t speak to them?”

“Not in the forest, no.”

“Good.” The man smiled at Daniel. But his face was grim when he looked at the “strangers.”

Pete, Jude, and Bob introduced themselves.

Daniel in turn introduced the village headman and chief hunter, Amos Turner.

"My father is missing," Bob said, his voice desperate now as he explained what had happened.

"What can we do to help them, Uncle?" Daniel asked.

Bob watched the headman eagerly.

"It is a problem," the older man said. "This has never happened in my time. I must consult."

The headman turned on his heel and left as abruptly and silently as he had arrived. Bob's face fell in disappointment.

"There's nothing we can do for now," Daniel Grayleaf reassured Bob. "With luck, Uncle will bring back good news."

Bob nodded worriedly.

"What's a vision quest?" Jupe asked to pass the time and distract Bob. Before Daniel could answer, Jupe's stomach rumbled. Somewhere something delicious was cooking. The dieting Investigator could smell it.

"I'll tell you about it," Daniel said, "but first can I get you something to eat?"

"You sure can!" Jupe said instantly.

"What about your popcorn, Jupe?" Pete kidded, and his stomach made a noise too.

Jupiter laughed. "You want to pop it? I can't wait that long!"

"Be right back," Daniel said, and hurried off toward the clearing where the drumbeat continued slowly.

"That guy can move," Pete said with awe.

Bob was obsessed with one thought. "They've got to give us a lift out of here!"

"They will," Jupiter said with more conviction than he felt. He looked around, wondering what the drumbeats meant.

Soon Daniel was back. "Come with me. The food's on the tables. First we dance, then feast, then make the ceremony. You're our special guests, so you get to feast now."

"You mean you have to wait till later?" Bob said, abashed. "That's not right."

"We'll wait," Pete insisted.

Jupe gulped. "Happy to wait," he echoed, trying to sound sincere.

Daniel laughed. "Don't be crazy. The food's ready. You're hungry. You honor us by feasting first."

The three friends looked at one another.

"We shouldn't insult our hosts," Jupe said.

"Right," Pete agreed.

"Thanks, Daniel," Bob said. He hoped wherever his father was, someone was feeding him, too.

They followed Daniel through the village. Adults and children stared at them curiously. Men were filtering into the central clearing where the women and children had gathered. The men were bare-chested and wore feather headdresses and necklaces of feathers and colored stones. The women wore necklaces and dresses with elaborate beadwork. Some of the men were stepping in time to the drumbeat and shaking what looked like two sticks tied together. The sticks sounded a little like rattles.

"Clap sticks," Daniel explained. "They're warming up. But come over here. Take plates and fill them. You can eat and watch and I'll try to explain what's going on."

Women removed basket covers from big platters of food. The three friends filled their plates with steaming meats, potatoes, beans, and bread. Jupe was so happy to see real food again, he took giant portions. The heck with his diet!

"Venison?" Pete asked Daniel, pointing to one of the platters.

"Yes, and that's rabbit, and that's squirrel. Over there is the fish. We catch it in the Truoc. In our language, truoc means 'the river.'"

They sat on benches beneath a mammoth redwood tree. Their table was a wide packing crate labeled in big block letters: engine parts, Nancarrow trucking company. Nearby, an old Chevrolet truck was raised on blocks, its engine spread in pieces on another engine parts box. On the other side of them was the Truoc, which seemed more like a very large stream than a river. It flowed clear and deep alongside the village.

"Is this the same river that comes out of that big valley north of here?" Bob asked Daniel, remembering the hidden valley.

"You know the valley?" Daniel said, suddenly suspicious.

"Well, sort of," Bob said carefully. He took a bite of the venison. "I saw it from a distance."

"No one can go in there," Daniel said. "It's sacred. We call it the Valley of the Ancestors. It's part of our reservation and where we bury our people. Sometimes we have ceremonies there."

"I didn't go in," Bob assured him. He took another bite of

venison. "Your people must have been here a long time."

"How do you know?"

"The handholds and footholds on the cliff. I was almost caught in a landslide, otherwise I wouldn't have noticed them. Looked like they were carved a long time ago."

"They come from the beginning, when the Creator made our people," Daniel said. "He also made the rock slides to keep out those without knowledge. And he made the willow tree from which we weave the baskets we use to raise our dead into the valley. The Creator made everything." He smiled. "I see. You were looking for your father. The Ancestors would understand."

"But they wouldn't understand sightseers."

"No tourists," Daniel agreed firmly. "Ever."

Jupiter had eaten half his food and, was feeling better. "Something pretty important must be going on if you can't leave the village."

"The people have been sick," Daniel explained. "We have red eyes, some of us cough, our chests hurt. Some have fire-building devils in their stomachs. The elders decided to have a singing way ceremony to get rid of the terrible sickness. The village is closed until noon tomorrow. None of us can leave."

"Shouldn't you go to a real doctor?" Pete asked.

Jupiter kicked him under the table. Pete flinched.

"It's all right," Daniel told them. "You have your doctors, we have ours. Ours is a singing doctor, a shaman. He's taken care of us since before I was born. He's very wise. Sometimes he sends us to Bakersfield to the clinic there, but usually not. We're always healthy, or soon healthy again. Until a few months ago."

"Does your rule about staying here mean us too?" Bob said. "And in an emergency, can't someone take us out?"

"That's what Uncle is finding out from the singing doctor."

Suddenly the drums pounded loudly. The clap sticks rattled in unison. An enormous howl, eerie and almost inhuman, reverberated across the village. The four young men stood, looking at the clearing.

The dancers danced up and down in a large circle. Their moccasined feet moved lightly with the beat.

"They go up and down at different times, you see?" Daniel said. "That's because the world is like a boat. If everyone leans to one side at the same time, it rocks and

then turns over. That's not good."

Soon a few dancers moved into the circle's center to solo. They jumped and leaped, moving sharply and strangely.

"When the world was reborn," Daniel explained, "the Creator appointed the woodpecker to report how things were going. So now we have men with pure hearts who jump inside the circle and jerk their heads back and forth like a woodpecker. They spread their arms, fly around, and sing the woodpecker song. This reminds the woodpecker spirit that someone is sick and he should report it to the Creator. If the Creator knows, he can make the doctor very strong so the sick person can get well."

The dancing continued. The Indian men sweated, changing places around and inside the circle. The women and children watched, often clapping and singing. The sickest people lay on mats, their heads propped up on blankets so they could see. It was a colorful ceremony, full of intensity.

And then it was over.

The drums stopped. The dancers and audience moved to the food tables, and the women removed the basket covers from the platters. Jupe noticed that the dancers all seemed to have red eyes, and now some of them coughed.

The headman, whom Daniel called Uncle, and an old man with a stern expression soon appeared. They were fiercely elegant in their ceremonial feathers as they weaved through the crowd. From the villagers' respectful manner, the Investigators guessed the old man was the village's shaman, their singing doctor. Although the two men paused occasionally to talk to the dancers, they were moving steadily toward Daniel and the three guys.

At last they stopped in front of them.

"We cannot help you," the headman, Amos Turner, announced. "You must walk out alone. That is our decision."

Chapter 8

The Vision Quest

“THE RISK IS TOO BIG,” THE SINGING DOCTOR SAID. “The ceremony must be kept pure. We have many, many sick people.”

His old face was weather-beaten, wrinkled, and—it seemed to Bob, Jupiter, and Pete—genuinely sorry. But that didn’t help Mr. Andrews much.

“It would be better if you stayed here,” the head-man, Amos Turner, insisted. “Tomorrow someone will drive you out.”

“We have to go today,” Bob said. “My father could be really hurt.”

“It is a big country,” the stern headman continued, “much bigger than you think. How will you find Diamond Lake?” His strong features were locked in disapproval.

“We’ll follow the road,” Pete said.

“Then you will walk forty miles,” the headman said.

“Forty miles!” Pete gulped.

Jupe’s arches almost collapsed—and then he had an idea.

“Perhaps we could rent one of your pickups,” he suggested.

For the first time since they’d arrived in the village, Bob’s handsome face brightened. It was just like Jupe to come up with a simple, logical solution that everyone else had missed.

“We have driver’s licenses,” Bob said quickly.

“And money,” Pete added, pulling out his billfold. It held the savings he had planned to spend on his Diamond Lake vacation. “We’ll pay.”

“And we’ll deliver the truck to wherever you want to pick it up,” Jupe said. “We’ll take very good care of it. Here, let me give you our card. People have trusted us to solve their problems. Now we’re asking you to help us solve ours.”

Jupiter handed a small white business card to each of the two men. They were the new cards he had designed for The Three Investigators.

The headman held the card stiffly in front of him. The singing doctor didn't even look at it, but passed it to Daniel. Daniel read it aloud for them.

The headman shook his head. "It is a bad idea."

The singing doctor frowned. "Perhaps, but I think it will do no harm." He looked appraisingly at the boys, his old, faded eyes shrewd. "These three will go in any case. Better that they take what we can give."

The headman narrowed his lips. He didn't like it, but the decision was the shaman's. "Very well. I will arrange it." He left, skirting the crowd at the food tables.

"Thank you," Bob said, and smiled gratefully.

The old man smiled too, and for a moment his eyes danced. "You young ones," he murmured. "In so much trouble all the time." Then he turned to Daniel. "So?"

"I did as you said."

"Tell them what you did," the singing doctor ordered. "They are interested."

Daniel turned to the three guys. "I've been on a vision quest. For twenty-four hours I fasted and ran through the forest. I stopped only to pray. At night I slept so the Creator could give me a message."

"What was your dream, Grandson?" the shaman asked.

"Grandson? Are you related to everyone, Daniel?" Pete blurted out.

Daniel and the singing doctor laughed.

"It's one of the ways we show respect," Daniel said. The singing doctor nodded.

"So the headman isn't your uncle?" Bob said.

"And I am not the shaman's grandson. But he is like a grandfather to all of us."

The three guys nodded.

"My dream was strange, Grandfather," Daniel said formally. "It began in a large green lake. I waded in, and a fish jumped into my hands. I thought I was very lucky—the fish would make a good meal. I gave thanks. Then many fish jumped into my hands, and there were so many I couldn't catch them all. They kept jumping at me, my back, my chest, my face. They were hitting me, harder and harder."

"You thought they would beat you to death?" the shaman

asked.

Daniel nodded. "I threw all the fish back and left."

"You acted properly. What did you learn?"

"What we get without effort is often worthless and sometimes even bad," Daniel said promptly.

The singing doctor nodded, pleased. "And what message did the Creator give you?"

"In the right place, but without blessing."

"Ahhh." The singing doctor repeated the message to himself. He seemed to pale as he thought about it. "Does it answer your question?" The Investigators looked inquiringly at Daniel. "I don't understand it," Daniel said sadly. "I'll never find him."

"The Creator gave you the answer," the shaman corrected. "Use it."

Daniel dropped his eyes. "Yes, Grandfather."

"You must dress for the next ceremony."

"Yes, Grandfather." Daniel turned to Jupiter, Bob, and Pete. He flashed them a dazzling smile. "Good luck." And then he was gone, running like the wind.

"Goodbye, young warriors," the singing doctor told them. "Trust only yourselves."

He moved into the crowd, smiling and speaking with his ailing flock.

"Look at the headman," Pete said, nodding at a corrugated-metal hut about fifty yards away.

The muscular headman stood in front of the hut, talking with a slight Indian who kept rubbing his hands on the front of his jeans. The small man nodded constantly as if the headman was giving him a series of instructions. At last the headman returned to the food tables, and the smaller man disappeared into the hut. Many wooden crates of various sizes were stacked on one side of the building. Each of them bore the name Nancarrow trucking company in big block letters.

Jupiter sat down to finish his meat and potatoes. He picked up his fork and leaned over to dig in. That's when he saw the cigarette butt. It was lying on the ground right next to the Nancarrow packing box.

He reached down and picked it up. It was yellow and battered, but it had the same emerald band and long filter as the butt he'd found early that morning.

"Hey, Jupe," Pete said. "What's up?"

"Look," Jupiter said simply. He held out his hand with

both butts on the palm.

"Wow!" Pete said.

"What does that mean?" Bob wondered.

"Beats me," Jupe said, "but I think I'll hold on to them. You never know."

A young woman emerged from the crowd and walked toward Jupe, Pete, and Bob.

"I'm Mary Grayleaf, Daniel's sister," she said to all of them, but her gaze was on Bob. She smiled at the handsome Investigator. "Here." She dropped a key into his hand. "Our headman said to tell you the pickup will be ready for you soon. Have you had plenty to eat?"

"Plenty," Bob assured her, returning her gaze. Her face was strikingly pretty and was framed by long straight hair. She wore a necklace of turquoise stones over her loose white dress. Bob noticed that her eyes were red too, almost as red as the embroidery that decorated the hem and sleeves of her dress.

"Are you really Daniel's sister," Bob asked, "or is that another term of respect?"

For a moment Mary Grayleaf looked puzzled. Then she gave a light, merry laugh. "Really, I am."

Jupiter and Pete looked at each other. Jupiter raised an eyebrow. Pete stifled a chuckle. Bob had done it again, and without even trying. Wherever he went, he was a magnet for pretty young women.

"Is there going to be more ceremony now?" Bob asked her.

"The shaman is going to sing and dance," she said, still looking into his eyes. "Then he'll pray. He's preparing himself to receive a message from the Creator that will tell him what's making our people sick. When he knows, he'll put an enchantment on whoever or whatever it is, and then he can begin our cure."

"And enchantments work?" Bob said, smiling.

"Always," she said seriously. "And cures, too."

Jupiter couldn't stand it any longer. "What about vision quests?"

That got her attention. "You heard Daniel's quest message? What was it?"

Jupiter thought a moment, then repeated, "In the right place, but without blessing."

She considered the words, and then shook her head. "I don't know what it means. Did Daniel?"

“No. The singing doctor told him to think about it,” Bob said. “Why’s it important?”

“Because...” Mary frowned, closing her eyes. She opened them. “Our uncle, our real uncle, is missing. He helped our mother raise Daniel and me after our father moved off the reservation. Father disappeared years ago. Now our uncle has disappeared too. He’s been gone over a month, and Daniel keeps searching the forest.”

“Something weird’s going on around here,” Bob said. “My father’s missing too.”

She nodded, her dark eyes sad. Something in the crowd caught her attention. It was the slight man who had been taking instructions from the headman. The Investigators had not seen him leave his hut. Now he raised a hand to Mary, signaling.

“Your pickup is ready,” she said, rubbing her reddened eyes.

She led them around the other side of the village, past tethered dogs and a tall mound of dirt that was the diameter of a large house. “That’s the sweat lodge, where the men purify their bodies,” she said.

“I have another question,” Jupe said. His hand slipped into his voluminous shirt pocket and brought out the two cigarette butts. “Do you know who smokes these cigarettes?”

“No,” Mary said, puzzled.

Disappointed, Jupe put them back into his pocket.

They passed a bright red new Ford pickup. It stood out among the old trucks and Jeeps in the village. “The headman’s,” Mary said. “He’s a good man and the best rifle shot in the village. He buys us new clothes, tools, and parts for our trucks when they break down.”

“Where does he get the money?” Jupe asked her.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Part-time jobs in Diamond Lake, I guess. It’s none of my business.” She patted the fender of a dented, rusted Ford F-100. “This is his old truck. He’s lending it to you. Take good care of it. You’re to leave it at the ranger station in Diamond Lake.”

After stowing their gear in the back, the guys climbed into the cab. There were no seat belts. Pete sat behind the wheel. He was their mechanic and the best driver.

“Take our road north until it runs into a two-lane logging road,” she told them. “Take that road west. It’s dirt too, and will lead you to the highway. Turn right, and follow the

highway into Diamond Lake.”

They thanked her. Pete started the motor. Mary smiled and waved goodbye, looking at Bob. The three drove off, the old truck backfiring. Dust spun up behind the wheels. Dogs barked.

“Wheels,” Pete said with satisfaction. “At last.”

“Yeah,” Jupe said. “It’s almost enough to makeup for Bob’s disgusting popularity.”

“Sorry, guys,” Bob said cheerfully. “What can I say? If you’ve got it, flaunt it.”

Jupe and Pete turned and made faces at him. Bob sat back in the seat, thinking about Mary. Pete leaned forward to concentrate on the narrow road, steering high over the ruts. The road wound out of the red-woods and back into the pines, rising and falling with the gentle hills.

“I don’t think the headman likes us,” Pete said.

“But the shaman does,” Jupe said. “He made sure we got the truck. Did you see his expression when Daniel told him his quest message? That guy knows what it means, and he isn’t happy.”

“You think something’s happened to the uncle?”

“A month’s a long time to be gone,” Jupe said. “And what’s making all those Indians sick? They could just have a virus, but I wonder...” He lapsed into silence, pinching his lower lip. He always did that when he was thinking hard.

A couple of miles past their starting point, the road began to climb. They drove up the steep grade. The early afternoon sun shone brightly, warming the fragrant pines.

At the top of the hill, the truck backfired loudly.

They started down the steep decline. The truck quickly picked up speed.

Pete pressed the brakes. The old truck slowed. He released the brakes, and free again, the truck went faster and faster.

They whizzed past trees and bushes.

Pete hit the brakes. For a moment the truck slowed. Suddenly the brake pedal snapped free. Pete’s foot slammed all the way to the floor. The truck raced downward again. The unconnected brake pedal lay uselessly on the pickup’s floor.

“I don’t believe it!” Pete gasped. “The brakes are gone!”

Chapter 9

Rough Riders

THE PICKUP PLUNGED FASTER AND FASTER DOWN the steep hill, locked in the deep ruts.

Pete hung on to the wheel. Next to him, Jupe slammed from side to side like an unhappy beach ball. Bob, on Jupe's other side, grabbed the passenger door's armrest. The three guys bounced and smashed their heads on the ceiling.

"The emergency brake!" Jupe said.

"We're going too fast," Pete shot back. "It won't do a thing!"

"Then what?" Bob yelled.

"Maybe the road will level out!" Jupe said, his teeth rattling.

"First I gear down," Pete shouted. "If I can!"

Sweat broke out on Pete's forehead as he grabbed the stick, hesitated, then rammed it from third gear into second.

The motor screamed with the increased revolutions. The truck lurched, then slowed.

But not enough. The pickup still hurtled down the hill.

"Look out! There's a bend!" Bob cried. The road ahead angled right and disappeared around a hill.

The three guys shouted, "Whooooa" as the pickup whipped around the long downward curve. Tree roots extended out of the hill above the road where erosion had washed away the soil.

Pete turned the steering wheel right, toward the hillside.

"I'm gonna run the side of the truck against the hill!" he said. "It'll slow us down!"

The pickup popped out of the ruts.

"Watch it!" Jupe shouted.

Dirt, rocks, and small boulders from the eroded bank lay piled along the edge of the road. The truck plowed into them.

Pete fought the wheel. It spun out of control. The truck bounced and shook like an old washing machine.

Again Pete wrenched the wheel toward the embankment. Too late, the truck went into a skid. It thudded back into the deep ruts.

"Here we go again!" Pete said grimly.

Locked in the ruts, the pickup flew around the next bend, passing the embankment.

"Look!" Bob said. "We're going to go up."

Ahead lay a short hill that sloped gently upward.

"At last!" Jupe said, his round face glistening with sweat.

The truck roared to the bottom of the steep hill and on up the short one as if it were on a roller coaster. Motor screaming, the truck maintained its ferocious speed.

The knuckles of Pete's hands were white on the steering wheel. Bob held on to the sill of the open window with a death grip. In the middle, Jupe sat and sweated, one hand on the dashboard and the other on the ceiling, trying to brace himself.

The embankment was far behind them. Brush grew thickly along the sides of the road. The pickup began to slow as it climbed the hill.

The guys breathed easier. If there was a long level stretch on the top, the truck would roll to a stop.

"Oh, no!" Jupe cried as the truck reached the crest.

Although the truck had slowed, it still took the top of the hill as if its tail were on fire. It sailed over. It landed with jaw-throbbing crashes, first on its back wheels and then on the front wheels.

And it went hurtling down the other side, skidding along the road. The trees were a blur.

"Hang on!" Pete bellowed as he twisted the steering wheel to match the car's skids.

Helpless without seat belts, the three were again tossed in every direction. The old vehicle shook as if it were having a seizure. It landed back in the ruts.

"It's going to fall apart!" Jupe said.

"Yow! It's going to fall off!" Bob cried, leaning out his window. The right side of the road had suddenly disappeared. Tree tops barely peaked up over the top of the road. Pine, brush, and granite covered the steep, hundred-foot drop. Taking a trip down that mountainside would be fatal.

Pete kept to the ruts, grimly aware that now they were an asset—they kept the truck away from the precipice. The truck careened around a shallow curve and at last left the sheer drop behind.

"Look!" Pete said, excited.

And there it was—straight ahead, the end of their nightmare ride. Maybe.

A tall granite cliff loomed in front of them, running east-west. The road angled right, traveling along-side it. If Pete could just ease the truck against the rock.

"You've got to be kidding!" Jupe said. "You'll take the truck's side off!"

"A spark in the wrong place, and the gas tank'll explode!" Bob chimed in.

"You got a better idea?" Pete said, his jaw jutting in determination.

Jupe and Bob were silent. They stared at the granite that now climbed along the left edge of the road.

The Ford roared onward. Again Pete jumped it out of the ruts.

It banged into the granite cliff. It bounced off in a hail of sparks.

"Oh, boy," Bob muttered.

Pete concentrated on the cliff, a gray blur on his left. He turned the wheel slightly toward it, trying to steady the Ford. The truck touched the granite. Sparks flew once more. It touched again. Again.

The tension inside the truck was electric.

"Steady," Jupe said.

"You can do it, Pete," said Bob.

Pete turned the wheel one more time. The truck touched the cliff, and he held it there. The metal screamed in protest as it scraped the granite. Sparks cascaded.

The three guys sweated.

And the truck slowed. Like an exhausted rogue elephant, it relaxed into a noisy, smelly amble.

The tires crunched and the metallic body groaned against the granite as gravity pulled it on.

At last the Ford simply stopped, the motor idling. Pete turned it off. The pickup's front left fender rested against the cliff.

Pete, Jupe, and Bob sat in the cab, savoring the sudden silence. Dust swirled in the air. No one moved or said anything for a moment.

"Pete, you wrecked this vehicle," Jupe said solemnly.

"You'll have to pay for it," Bob added.

"Your insurance'll go up."

"Your good driver record is ruined."

Pete turned slowly and looked at them, incredulous.

"And how can we ever thank you?" Jupe said, slapping Pete on the back.

“Talk about a ride!” Bob grinned, and punched him in the arm.

Pete started laughing. “You’re welcome, you idiots. Are you gonna sit there all day? I want to see what she looks like. In case you haven’t noticed, I can’t exactly get my door open.”

They piled out of the battered truck and walked around to the back.

Pete shook his head. “Jupe, wait till I tell your cousin Ty about this!”

From front fender to back, a broad band of the driver’s side was rubbed clean of paint and rust, the steel polished to silver. Gashes streaked the flattened body. The door’s edges had melted into the frame, and the door handle was long gone.

“Uh—huh,” Pete said, and returned to the cab.

“Uh—huh?” Jupe repeated, following him.

Pete sprawled across the cab floor, his head and hands under the steering wheel where the foot pedals were. He picked up something from the floor.

“Well?” Jupe said impatiently.

Pete slid back out of the cab and stood up. He held up part of a bolt.

Jupe examined it. There were tiny saw marks where a blade had cut the bolt almost all the way through. He passed it to Bob.

“This has to do with our lack of brakes, I take it,” Jupe said.

“You bet,” Pete said. “The brake pedal is attached to a shaft that leads to the master cylinder. When you step on the pedal, a piston in the cylinder forces brake fluid out and into the brake lines—”

“Get to the point, will you?” Bob said.

“All right, all right,” Pete grumbled. “You need that bolt to attach the pedal to the shaft.”

“And somebody cut it enough so that at the first big stress, it’d break,” Jupe said quietly.

“That’s it,” Pete confirmed.

Bob groaned. It seemed like they were farther than ever from finding his dad.

The three friends looked at one another. They were in big trouble.

“It had to be one of the Indians,” Jupe said.

“The headman?” Pete wondered. “He didn’t like us. But

enough to kill us?"

"It couldn't have been Daniel," Bob said, thinking.

"Or Mary," Jupe added.

"Not Mary," Bob repeated firmly.

"We can't go back there for help," Pete said.

"Not since one of them just tried to kill us," Jupe. agreed.
"It'd be better to go to Diamond Lake. Can you fix the brake pedal, Pete?"

"With a new bolt. But where do we get one?"

Pete and Bob searched the truck. They found nothing, not even a jack.

"Do you think the Cessna would have the bolt you need?" Jupe asked Pete. "I think there were some tools in the back." Jupe started strolling west along the cliff.

Pete and Bob glanced at each other and then stared after Jupe.

"It's the same cliff!" Pete said, excited.

"Looks like it," Jupe said. "We can follow the cliff back to the meadow, get the bolt, come back here, fix the truck, and drive to Diamond Lake for help to find Mr. Andrews." Jupe sighed, pleased with his plan but mentally exhausted by the amount of hiking it would take.

Bob got the water bottle out of the back of the truck. The guys tied their jackets around their waists and walked back uphill, following the road as it ran along the cliff. They saw the scars left by the pickup. When they passed the missing door handle, Bob kicked it into the brush on the other side of the road.

When the dusty road swung south toward the Indian village, the guys left it to follow the cliff west into the forest.

Soon the pines grew thick, their tall tops arching overhead. Birds sang, and the forest swayed with a light wind. It was a warm mid-afternoon, but it was cool in the shade of the trees.

Suddenly a shot exploded.

A bullet whined past Pete's ear and thudded into a nearby pine. Bark chips flew into the air.

Jupe, Pete, and Bob hit the ground. A second bullet whizzed above them. They stared at one another.

Someone was shooting at them!

Chapter 10

Trigger-happy

“WHERE ARE THEY?” SAID A ROUGH VOICE IN THE forest behind Jupiter, Bob, and Pete.

“Come on, Biff,” a second voice answered. “Move it. We’ll find em!”

The voices echoed through the trees. It was hard to pinpoint where they came from.

“Why would anyone shoot at us?” Bob whispered, his face flat on the ground.

“Don’t know,” Jupe whispered back, “but it’d be pretty unhealthy sticking around to find out.”

The three looked at one another, nodded, and silently rose to their feet.

“Let’s go!” Pete urged, taking off through the pines.

Bob and Jupe hustled after him. They ran parallel to the cliff face, heading for the meadow.

Again, gunshots rang out overhead. Pine needles showered down.

The guys ducked and dropped to their hands and knees. They scuttled to safety around a house-size boulder.

“Where’d they go?” the rough voice grumbled loudly behind them from the dense forest.

“Rotten kids!” the other man complained.

The men were heavy-footed. Twigs snapped. Gravel spun and crunched. The men didn’t care whether they were heard or not.

The guys took off again, Pete weaving a path for them through the pines.

“There they go!” the rough voice shouted. “Get em!”

Shots whined. Bullets hit into the earth around the guys. Dirt exploded into the air.

“Faster!” Pete ordered.

He raced through the shadows. Bob and Jupe followed. To keep their bearings, they stayed in sight of the cliff face. Jupe breathed hard but gamely kept up with his two friends. At last they paused behind a thicket of manzanita.

“Either of you see what they looked like?” Jupe panted.

“Negative,” Bob reported. He took off his father’s hat and wiped his wet face. “You okay, Jupe? Your face is as red as

a tomato.”

“No sweat,” Jupe gasped. “Just like taking a stroll through the park.”

“Let’s keep moving,” Pete said.

The three pushed off at a fast walk.

“Do you think we lost them?” Bob wondered.

“With luck,” Jupe said.

“They didn’t sound like they intended to give up,” Pete said.

The Investigators continued west, paralleling the cliff. They stayed close to whatever cover they could find. They hiked a couple of miles. They passed wildflowers, thick pine groves, piles of boulders, and a sparkling creek where they refilled their water bottle.

“How much longer?” Pete asked.

“If we’re right, it should be soon,” Jupe said.

They moved again.

“There it is!” Pete cried.

They emerged at the southern edge of the big, familiar meadow.

“Where’s the plane?” Jupe said instantly.

They stared ahead, shocked. The Cessna was missing. Even the broken-off wing was gone! How could that be?

“Wait,” Pete cautioned, peering closer. “It’s camouflaged!”

“Someone’s piled brush over it!” Bob told them. “And look! Our big SOS is gone!”

“Now nobody can spot us,” Pete said.

“You know,” Jupe let out slowly, “I get the feeling somebody doesn’t like us.”

“Yeah. But who?” Bob wondered. “And why?”

“Are you fellows lost?” a deep bass voice asked.

The guys whirled around.

A big blond man with wraparound sunglasses was hiking toward them through the forest from the south-east.

“Anything I can do to help?” he said with a friendly smile. He was dressed in khaki, wore a backpack, and had a leather rifle case slung over his left shoulder. The flap on the case was loose and made a slapping sound as he walked.

“Where did you come from?” Pete asked, astonished.

“I’ve been hunting, but no luck today,” the man said. “Never been here before. This part of the Sierras is new to me.” He stuck out a big, meaty hand. “Name’s Oliver Nancarrow, Ollie to my pals.” With a friendly grin, he shook

hands with the three guys. They introduced themselves to him.

Bob smiled eagerly. "Do you have a car here, Mr. Nancarrow...er, Ollie?"

"I parked up there," Nancarrow said, and nodded at the tall cliff. "A long ways off. There's a dirt logging road north. That's where I am. It goes into the highway to Diamond Lake."

"We don't mind hiking to your car, do we, guys?" Bob said. "Let's go."

"Wait a minute," Nancarrow said. "If I'm going to give you guys a ride, you might give me a clue why you need one."

Bob described their crash and the disappearance of his father. Finally he said, "We've got to move fast. Dad could need help bad."

"Has something else happened?" Nancarrow persisted. "I heard gunshots an hour or so ago."

The three guys looked at one another. If they told Nancarrow about the men chasing and shooting at them, Nancarrow might not want to have anything to do with them.

"Just hunters probably," Jupe said.

"We need to hurry," Bob urged.

Nancarrow hesitated only a moment. "Okay. Seems to me there's more going on than you're telling me. But I don't mind you keeping it to yourselves. Of course I'll help."

Nancarrow led them across the meadow, heading toward the cliff—Bob on his right, Jupe on his left, and Pete trailing behind.

"Your name is sure familiar," Jupe said as they walked. "Are you famous?"

"Hardly." Nancarrow chuckled. "I own a couple of little restaurants in Bakersfield. What did you say you and your father came up here for, Bob?"

Bob told him that his dad was a newspaper reporter and that he'd arranged to meet a news source in Diamond Lake.

As they walked and Bob talked, Nancarrow took out a cigarette. Pete's eyebrows shot up—it was very dangerous to smoke in such dry country. But Jupe looked back and signaled Pete to say nothing. The cigarette Nancarrow was lighting had a long filter and an emerald band encircling the white paper next to it—just like the cigarette butts Jupe had found on the granite plateau where Mr. Andrews' blue

Dodgers cap had been and, later, on the ground in the Indian village. Jupe knew he'd heard—or seen—the name Nancarrow somewhere. Was it in the Indian village?

"We think Dad was meeting a guy named Mark MacKeir," Bob finished. He took his father's small notebook from his pocket and checked it. "Mark MacKeir, that's it. Does the name mean anything to you?"

"How strange," Nancarrow said. "Actually, it's awful. I don't know him, but I heard on the radio this morning that a Mark MacKeir was killed yesterday as he was driving up to Diamond Lake. I believe they said he was taking a vacation. He lost control of his car and it pitched over the side of the road and exploded. He died instantly."

"Oh, no," Bob breathed.

They were silent, thinking about Mark MacKeir's fiery death. Jupiter's gaze was caught by the unfastened flap on Nancarrow's rifle case. It was flopping up and down as Nancarrow walked. Each time the flap lifted, it showed part of the dark metal inside. Jupe had just finished reading a book on arms and armaments. The rifle was an unusual shape—it had an enormous bulge in the center, which meant the leather case had probably been custom built to accommodate its strange dimensions.

"Right now you and Mr. Andrews are more important," Nancarrow said. "Who knows you guys are here?"

"A few people," Jupiter answered before Bob could say no one. "The newspaper, of course."

"That right, Bob?" Nancarrow said, turning to him.

While Nancarrow's head was turned, Jupe tried to lift the case's flap. He wanted to look inside.

Something was nagging him about Nancarrow. Something more than the coincidence of the cigarettes. The packing crate they'd eaten lunch on at the Indian village had Nancarrow trucking company printed on the side. The same label had been on all of the wooden crates stacked outside one of the huts. That hut had belonged to the Indian who had signaled Mary that the headman's truck was ready. Nancarrow had lied. He had been here before—and often, by the look of things.

Bob glanced over at Jupe. Surprise showed in his eyes when he realized Jupe was trying to see inside the rifle case. He blinked and recovered fast. He knew what Jupe needed. He flashed his magnetic smile at Oliver Nancarrow.

"Sure," Bob said to him. "Dad told the city editor we

were coming, and of course the managing editor because she has to okay the extra hotel bills.”

Jupe was leaning over to see inside the rifle case when Nancarrow suddenly stopped walking.

Jupe dropped his hand from the flap and took an immediate interest in tying his shoelaces.

Nancarrow inhaled his cigarette one last time and ground it out beneath his heel. Pete couldn't stand the ecological insult. He picked up the butt when Nancarrow wasn't looking and dropped it into his pocket.

“When do they expect you back?” Nancarrow asked Bob as they hiked on. They were very near the tall, gray cliff.

“Well, we were supposed to call in yesterday,” Bob said. He'd figured out that Jupiter didn't trust Nancarrow, and he'd learned long ago that Jupiter was more often right than wrong. So now he told Nancarrow a convenient lie.

While Nancarrow was occupied with Bob, Jupiter—with the skill of a pickpocket—lifted the long top flap of the rifle case.

“Then they'll be sending someone out to look for you?” Nancarrow asked Bob.

Jupiter carefully leaned over to look inside the leather case.

“There'll be search parties all over the mountains any time now,” Bob said.

“We thought we'd speed things up a bit by going for help,” Pete said, coming up to Nancarrow on the side opposite the rifle case.

Beneath the flap, Jupiter saw the carrying handle on top of the rifle. He could distinguish little else, but in a flash the strange shape made sense to him.

Suddenly Nancarrow stopped.

“Hold it!” he bellowed angrily. “What d' you think you're doing?” In one smooth movement he grabbed Jupiter's hand and flung it aside. He stepped back quickly to face all three guys. His eyes narrowed, and he whipped out a big, sleek rifle and pointed it at them.

“That's an M-16, all right,” Jupiter muttered. The bulge in the leather case had been built to accommodate the M-16's distinctive handle, pistol grip, and fat magazine.

“What's going on?” Bob said.

“M-16s were introduced in the Vietnam War,” Jupe continued, his heart pounding. “Now they're one of the most popular rifles in the world. But they're used for

hunting people, not game. Who are you, Mr. Nancarrow? What do you want with us?"

"Okay, hotshots," he said, waving the rifle at them. "I tried to do this nice, now we'll do it the hard way. Get your tails up that cliff! You're coming with me!"

Chapter 11

Fake-out

“COME ON, GUYS,” JUPITER SAID MEEKLY. “WE don’t want to make Mr. Nancarrow mad.” He shuffled toward the cliff.

Bob and Pete stared at Jupiter, surprised by his sudden new personality. Once Jupe had been a child actor, playing the part of Baby Fatso in a movie series called The Wee Rogues. He didn’t like to be reminded of the role, but he’d never forgotten how to act. He was a natural. Bob and Pete suddenly realized Jupe was acting now.

“Walk!” the big blond man ordered in a cold voice.

Pete and Bob walked. Nancarrow followed, aiming his gun at their backs.

“Is Mr. Andrews where you’re taking us?” Jupiter said in a wimpy voice from in front.

“Forget it, kid,” Nancarrow snapped, and gave a nasty, knowing laugh. “That’s for me to know and for you to shut up about.”

“So you did kidnap my dad!” Bob said, astounded. “What for?”

“Because he’s as nosy as your friend!” Nancarrow snarled. “And he talks almost as much without saying a darn thing. Now shut up!”

They hiked west along the cliff, looking for a good place to climb. Jupe was panting noisily.

“Don’t make us go so fast!” he complained.

“Cut the whining. We’re not slowing down,” Nancarrow said.

“Uh!” Jupe gasped. He let his heel slip over a moss-covered rock. He pitched backward, falling deliberately into Bob.

Bob staggered back. He missed Pete on purpose.

Pete’s eyes blinked, then narrowed as he understood what Jupe and Bob had done.

Nancarrow frowned, not quite sure what was happening.

It was enough of a hesitation for Pete. He spun around. With the rapid fire, polished motions that came from many hours in karate classes, he closed in on Nancarrow. Using his elbow’s spring power, he slammed a backhand block, a

haishu-uke, against the M-16, shoving the big rifle aside.

“Run for it!” he yelled at Bob and Jupe.

The two guys scrambled to their feet and tore across the meadow toward the western forest.

At the same time, Pete moved quickly into a front stance and delivered a hard lunge punch, an oi-zuki, into Nancarrow’s thick chest.

Nancarrow staggered back, off balance, still firmly gripping the M-16.

Pete raced for the pines.

Bullets sprayed the trees. Needles, dust, and bark filled the air. Birds screeched and flapped away. The boys fell flat, safely hidden in some bushes.

“Biff! George!” Nancarrow called. “Where are you, you lazy bums? Get over here. Those kids made a break for it!”

Pete looked up. He could see the gunman in the meadow. “Nancarrow’s got a walkie-talkie. He’s calling out on it.”

“Biff was one of the guys who was chasing us,” Bob whispered. “He had the rough voice.”

“And George must be the other one,” Jupe said just as softly. “Makes you think maybe they were herding us toward Nancarrow. They sure seemed to lose us easily, almost like they let us go.” Jupe told them what he had figured out about Nancarrow’s cigarettes and the packing boxes in the Indian village.

“But Nancarrow couldn’t have sabotaged the pickup,” Bob decided. “He would’ve been too far away.”

“I think it was that headman,” Pete said.

“We’ll have to figure that out later,” Jupiter told them. “Let’s get moving.”

“What about Dad?” Bob asked.

“We know from the way Nancarrow was talking that he’s alive,” Jupe said. “First we get out of this mess; then we find him.”

They looked out to the meadow, where Nancarrow still stood, staring into the trees.

“He’s saving ammo,” Jupe decided. “He won’t shoot until he sees us.”

The guys crept quietly to their feet and moved away through the pines.

“There they are!” the rough voice of Biff bellowed.

The guys ran a half-dozen steps. They froze.

Suddenly they were facing another M-16.

A dark-haired man with a deep tan and faded blue eyes

rotated his rifle from one guy to another. Slowly he smiled, but there was no warmth in his face.

"I got 'em," the man said with satisfaction. By the sound of his voice, he was George.

Another man stepped out on their left, aiming his M-16 at them. "Right where we want 'em. Right, fellas?" It was Biff's voice. He was a skinny little runt of a man with short brown hair and wild eyebrows. "These kids don't have much in the way of brains."

From behind, through the forest, came the arrogant voice of Oliver Nancarrow. "Okay, move them back this way. We got a long hike ahead."

"You heard the boss," Biff said. "Move!"

Jupe, Bob, and Pete glanced at one another. Pete shrugged. There was nothing they could do.

"Move, I said!" Biff growled.

Then he made a mistake. The little guy jabbed the muzzle of his M-16 into Pete's back.

Pete whirled. He grabbed the barrel from the side. He slammed it back into Biff's belly, knocking the wind out of him.

Biff fell in a heap, his fingers wrapped convulsively around the M-16.

Instantly Bob kicked high, using a yoko-geri-keage side snap kick. He connected with George's tan chin. George staggered back. Bob followed and kicked again. George collapsed.

Jupe hid behind a thick pine. He thought about using his judo as Nancarrow strode toward the clearing. But at the last minute Jupe opted for an easier technique. He stuck out his foot. Nancarrow tripped.

As Nancarrow stumbled forward Pete slammed an elbow strike, an otoshi hiji-ate, down hard on the back of Nancarrow's neck. The big blond man pitched forward, his face in the dirt.

And the three guys sped into the forest.

Behind them Nancarrow swore loudly at his helpers. "Get them alive! We don't want to have to carry them!"

The Investigators ran south through the woods, dodging trees and rocks. Behind them they could hear the hard feet of their pursuers.

They kept moving, growing more tired and discouraged as the feet steadily pounded after them.

Pete turned west onto a dirt trail. Bob recognized it—it

was the same one he'd used the day before when he'd filled the water bottle.

"We need a plan," Jupe panted. "We can't keep this up!"

"Got to rescue Dad, too!" Bob said.

There was an excited shout behind them. The guys poured on more speed.

"They found the path!" Pete said.

"They're going to grab us on this trail!" Bob warned.

"Let's forget the pickup," Jupe said, still running. "Pete, can you find that road Nancarrow was talking about?"

"The logging road that goes to the highway," Pete remembered. "Mary Grayleaf described it. The Indians' road was supposed to run right into it."

"That's it," Jupe said, breathing heavily. "You've got wilderness training. You're the strongest and fastest. You've got the best chance of making it to Diamond Lake."

"No prob," Pete said.

"And we'll get Nancarrow to chase us," Bob said. "Right, Jupe?"

"Right!"

The three guys gave one another quick high-fives and Pete was off. He left the path and melted into the trees. After Nancarrow and his thugs had passed by, chasing Jupe and Bob, Pete would return to the trail and head back up it for Diamond Lake.

Jupe and Bob ran on.

"We need a place to hole up," Jupe told Bob.

"How about a valley?" Bob said. "This is an emergency. I don't think the Ancestors would mind."

"Great!" Jupe said, puffing heavily.

Bob paused at a wide spot on the trail. "We'd better make sure Nancarrow follows us."

Jupe smiled. He caught his breath, then yelled, "Bob, I'm tired! I've got to rest!"

"You're always tired!" Bob yelled back. "I'm sick of you!"

Jupe's eyebrows shot up, slightly miffed even though he knew Bob was only pretending. "I don't care!" he bellowed. "Let's stop!"

They stood there, listening. The three gunmen were after them, all right. Their feet were thundering toward them like a herd of elephants.

"Oh, no!" Bob said. "Look!"

He held up his hand. He still had the water bottle.

"We should've given it to Pete!" Jupe said.

“Yeah, there’s a stream where we’re going. Who knows what Pete’ll find?”

Chapter 12

A Cliff-hanger

JUPE AND BOB'S SHOUTS AT EACH OTHER ECHOED through the trees to where Pete hid, listening.

Soon heavy feet rushed past his hiding place.

For a moment Pete pictured the deadly M-16s that Nancarrow and his gunmen carried. He hoped Jupe and Bob would be safe. Then he pushed the worry away. He had to concentrate on getting to Diamond Lake for help. It was up to him now.

He shook out his tight muscles and took off up the trail at an easy lope that ate up distance but didn't overtire him. The air was cool around him. The afternoon wind was rising. Tree tops rustled.

He followed the trail to the meadow and trotted along its edge toward the cliff. He'd seen no sign that Nancarrow had more men, but there was always a chance. He stayed near the shelter of the trees.

At the cliff he started climbing. Once on top of the desolate plateau, he paused to catch his breath. Somewhere here they'd found Mr. Andrews' cap. That was where he'd probably been kidnapped. But why? It made no sense.

Pete glanced out over the panorama of forested mountains. The wind whipped across the granite and pierced his thin T-shirt. His jacket was tied around his waist and his space blanket was in his pocket. He'd need both later. He wished he'd taken the water bottle from Bob, but it was too late to go back for it now. At least he still had some of Jupe's candy bars.

He turned north, noting where the sun fell on his shoulder and back. The position of the sun was his only compass.

He moved uphill across the granite as it rose toward a stand of timber. At the wood's edge he looked for a trail. When he found none, he picked an opening through the trees and continued his trek north.

The land grew steep. He alternately fast-hiked and walked. The sun dipped lower toward the horizon. He continued to push his strong, athletic body. Sweat drenched him.

The terrain leveled and rose into hills again.

As the last of the day's light died, Pete stumbled up over a ridge and stopped. He stared down.

It was a miracle.

There was a dirt road running east and west. It was rutted like the Indians' road had been, but it was twice as wide. It looked just like the logging road Mary Gray had described.

He slid down the ridge and stood quietly on the road for a moment, resting and savoring his success. Now if only a car would drive by and stop to help.

His muscles throbbed. It had been a long hike. And he still had twenty-five, maybe thirty miles to go. With luck, he'd catch a ride once he reached the highway.

He turned west, heading into the last brilliant streaks of the setting sun. As he walked he pulled on his jacket. The temperature was dropping fast.

The sun set and the full moon rose. He hiked over a bridge that spanned the juncture of two fast-running streams. Mist filled the cold air. The scent of pine was heavy. He wished he dared drink the water.

On the other side of the bridge he paused. What looked like a forest service fire road branched left off the logging road. The fire road went downhill alongside the double stream. To keep trespassers out, there was a tubular gate with a shiny new padlock that reflected silver in the moonlight. The little road and fast stream continued south together, disappearing through a narrow gorge in the ridge that the swift water had carved out centuries ago.

At first Pete was excited that the forest service had a road here. Then he remembered that fire roads were often remote and were used infrequently—mostly to fight forest fires and make rescues. It was unlikely that the forest service would come out here unless they were notified of an emergency.

So Pete walked on. He ate his candy bars. He was growing more and more cold and tired. Coyotes howled across the mountains—the loneliest sound in the world.

After leaving Pete, Bob and Jupe ran on, heavy feet pounding in hot pursuit after them. The pursuers came closer, and the guys increased their speed down the forest trail.

The sound was good news and bad news. The good news was that the three men must have passed Pete's hiding place

without discovering Pete. The bad news was that now Bob and Jupe had to figure out a way to permanently lose the thugs and their M-16s.

Wordlessly, Bob and Jupe reached the stream the Indians called the Truoc, “the River.” They headed upstream. The late afternoon wind was blowing over the clear, sparkling water toward them, carrying a sulfur smell that made their eyes burn.

Bob led, retracing the rocky path he’d followed the day before. They were out of breath and tired when they reached the talus-filled entrance to the Valley of the Ancestors. The dramatic waterfall roared down and then over the series of sparkling rapids.

“Wow!” Jupe exclaimed, staring up and up at the waterfall. “Is this where the landslide almost got you?”

“It was close,” Bob said. He looked downstream. “There they are!”

Jupe followed his gaze. About half a mile away the three men were rounding a big boulder. Nancarrow was in the lead. They had their M-16s slung over their shoulders. They looked up and spotted the two guys. Biff, the short, runty one with the rough voice, shouted something and shook his fist.

“We’d better get out of here!” Jupe said.

Bob hurried back into the forest, following the cliff, with Jupe close behind. At last Bob stopped, reached up, and locked his fingers into almost invisible handholds. He stepped up onto almost invisible footholds. The holds had weathered so much over the centuries that they appeared to be natural crevices in the rock face—until you looked closely.

Bob climbed.

Gingerly Jupe grabbed the first handholds and planted his feet into the narrow footholds. “Oh, boy,” he breathed. He didn’t like this. Sweat ran down his face and into his eyes. He balanced precariously.

“You can do it,” Bob urged.

Bob climbed up the cliff, showing Jupe the way. Each step moved them higher and to the left—closer and closer to the sheer cliff above the waterfall. On the other side was the Valley of the Ancestors.

Tall trees blocked them from their pursuers’ view. Not until Nancarrow and his men reached the rapids would they be able to see this section of the cliff, and by then the guys

expected to be out of sight—safely in the Valley of the Ancestors.

Slowly Jupe moved his hands and feet from one set of holds to the next. His arms and legs trembled with the strain. Why did I ever agree to this? he asked himself. I must be losing my mind!

And then his right foot slid off its narrow ledge. It happened so quickly that he could do nothing. He was fifty feet above the ground, and the spray from the falls had made the granite slippery as ice. Before he could bring the foot back, his right hand started to slide.

Desperately he tried to hold on to the granite. His heart pounded. His fingers grabbed at the stone. But the more he tried to hold on, the more his right hand slipped. He stared at his hand—how could it be doing this! And then it slid off altogether.

Time seemed to stop.

Only his left hand and left foot were still in place.

His body was out of control. Panting with fear, he swung out from the cliff like a door over the faraway ground. I'm going to die! he thought. I'm going to smash down on the rocks and die!

"Jupe!" Bob cried, stunned.

Jupiter's face was white. He seemed frozen.

"Dip your head!" Bob shouted. A hard fist of fear lodged in his chest. He had to save Jupe! "Move your right shoulder! Move your right leg. Change your balance so you'll swing back against the cliff!"

Jupe didn't move.

He hasn't heard me, Bob thought. "Jupe!" he bellowed. He reversed direction, crawling back down toward his friend.

Jupe sensed Bob. He didn't see Bob. He hardly heard him. But slowly Bob's directions were trickling through the muddle of Jupe's terrified mind. Use your head, Jupe told himself sternly. Think!

Just as Bob reached him, a look of deliberation came over Jupe's white face. Bob stared. He could almost see the wheels start to turn again in Jupiter's great brain. Bob held his breath, hoping.

Suddenly Jupe's head jerked forward. His right shoulder twitched and followed his head. Next came his right leg.

Jupe swung back to the cliff. Like an overweight automaton, his hands and feet found their places.

Exhausted, he leaned against the cliff.

"You did it, Jupe!" Bob called, excited. "You're okay! Now, come on. There's a ledge up here with some brush we can rest behind. They won't be able to see us. Come on, Jupe! It's not much farther!"

Stiffly, Jupe pried his hands loose. He reached for the next holds. His feet followed. With the same look of deliberation he moved up and across the cliff, jamming each hand and foot into its hold as if it were going to stay there for life.

Bob moved ahead. At last he scrambled up onto a narrow ledge. Thick spiny brush grew along the outer rim, drooping down the cliff face. It was a perfect cover.

"They're almost here!" Bob yelled. "Hurry!"

Jupe continued at the same slow pace. He never once looked around. He simply kept jamming his hands and feet into the holds until finally he was so close that Bob reached down and touched his fingers.

"You made it, Jupe," Bob said softly. Jupiter's fingers were icy cold.

Jupe said nothing. He shoved his hands and feet into the next crevices. Then he reached up and pulled himself onto the ledge next to Bob. He crawled behind the bushes. He sat still, closing his eyes.

"How close are they?" Jupe asked in a hoarse voice.

"Close enough," Bob said. "Look."

The cold mist from the waterfall swirled through the air, caught by the wind that whistled out of the valley. Sulfur stung their eyes as they gazed down at Nancarrow, Biff, and George hiking the last few steps to the waterfall.

"Where are those rotten jerks?" Nancarrow fumed. He stood hands on hips and surveyed the forest and cliffs through his wraparound sunglasses.

Bob and Jupe strained to hear his words over the roaring waterfall.

"You idiots let them get away!" Nancarrow shouted.

"They gotta be around here somewhere, boss!" George said.

"We'll find 'em!" Biff swore.

"We can't let them escape!" Nancarrow said angrily. "I've got that snoopy reporter Andrews safe. Now I've got to get my hands on those kids, too!"

At the mention of the word "reporter," Jupe and Bob looked at each other.

“It sounds like Nancarrow kidnapped your dad because he’s a reporter investigating a story,” Jupe said slowly. “Probably the story in Diamond Lake!”

“Poor Dad!” Bob said. “I wonder who MacKeir was, and what he knew.”

“We’ve got to make it look accidental!” Nancarrow was still talking.

“We’ll bang em on the head,” Biff said. “Knock ‘em out first like we did MacKeir!”

Bob and Jupe again looked at each other. They were shocked. Had Nancarrow’s men killed MacKeir?

“Then put them into the plane,” Oliver Nancarrow told him. “Burn them all up together—Andrews and the kids—make it look like it happened when the plane crashed. An accident just like MacKeir’s. And no one will ever know the difference!”

“No one’ll ever know!” Biff echoed fervently.

“You got it.” Nancarrow patted him on the shoulder. “Now you head back, Biff. This may take a while. There’s another shipment coming in tonight, and somebody’s got to handle it. That somebody is you.”

“Oh, boss,” he said, disappointed.

“Do it right, and when I bring back the kids I’ll let you take care of them yourself,” Nancarrow promised.

Biffs face brightened. “Okay!” He turned and trotted back down the stream.

“What shipment?” Bob wondered.

“Maybe the tip had to do with Nancarrow’s shipments,” Jupe said.

“Let’s go, George,” Nancarrow told his other underling. “Over this waterfall is a valley. Those kids might think that’s a good place to hide.”

Nancarrow started up the talus.

George grinned, showing all his crooked white teeth. He hugged his M-16 close and followed his boss toward the cliff just below where Jupiter and Bob hid.

The two Investigators froze. Once the thugs started up the slope, the guys would be exposed—with no other place to hide.

Chapter 13

Valley of Death

BIG OLIVER NANCARROW AND HIS MAN GEORGE carefully crawled up over the loose rocks at the base of the cliff. Nancarrow spotted the same natural crevice that Bob had climbed up yesterday. He grabbed it, pulled himself up, and started up the cliff face.

"This don't look too safe," George muttered. He slung his M-16 across his back and followed.

They climbed steadily, their faces flushed and sweating. Unknowingly they were headed straight to the ledge where Jupiter and Bob were hiding.

"Jupe!" Bob whispered.

Jupiter's arms and legs were still very shaky, but his mind was working fine. He grabbed an exposed root next to the ledge. He tugged. Nothing happened. He pulled harder. The root snapped out of the cliffs crumbling face. Stones, dirt, and sand exploded out too.

Nancarrow and George looked up. The stones hurtled down. They gathered debris. Large rocks broke loose from the cliff and joined the landslide. Then boulders.

The two men scrambled away.

The rock slide thundered past.

"Boss..." George began. His tan hands trembled against the cliff.

"Forget it," Nancarrow said. "We'll go back. Those kids couldn't have made it through here. We'll camp at the stream tonight. Find them in the morning."

Bob let out a big sigh. "Thanks, Jupe."

Nancarrow and George picked their way back down the granite.

With Bob in the lead, the two guys continued their progress across the rock face. Soon the channel broadened. From above, they could see the lush green Valley of the Ancestors—at last.

The sun was beginning to set, casting long shadows across the width of the valley. The stream that ran down the center was wide, placid, and edged with tall grass. Every so often steam rose, probably from natural hot springs. The valley was so long they couldn't see the other end.

The guys kept moving.

Jupe looked at Bob. "Your eyes are red," he said. "Are mine?"

Bob looked closely, then nodded. "Just like the villagers'." He paused, thinking about what he'd said. "Hey, Daniel's eyes weren't red. He'd been away from the village for a day when we saw him. Maybe the smell's making them sick. They're downhill, right on the Truoc. The wind would funnel the stuff out of the valley and straight to them."

"They're pretty sick. It'd take more than the smell of sulfur for that." Jupiter spoke briefly. He was concentrating. He meticulously placed his hands and feet in the holds. He didn't grip too hard. Boy, did he want to get off this cliff! Slowly he descended. At last he stepped down into a mass of ferns and gave a huge sigh of relief. He was on terra firma again!

Jupe looked around. Some of the ferns and flowers, now that he saw them up close, were brown and wilted next to the stream. And the mostly sparkling-clear stream had a gray, scummy film caught in places against the bank.

"Hey, look at this scum," he said to Bob.

Bob looked down. "Gross. What is it?"

"Doesn't look natural, does it?" Jupe said.

"Maybe it's some kind of water pollution?"

"Yeah, maybe," Jupe said. "My eyes are burning. Let's get out of here."

The last golden rays of the sun disappeared behind the high valley rim. Cold, dark shadows settled over them. They put on their jackets and followed the stream, walking along the flat bank through thick, lush foliage that was brown and dying next to the water.

They were on a gentle incline. The other end of the valley was higher than this end. Occasional landslides had eroded parts of the valley's rock walls.

"You know, our plane crash was sure convenient," Jupe said thoughtfully. He took out a candy bar and began to eat.

"How so?" Bob asked. He drank from the water bottle and ate too.

"First the electrical system goes out," Jupe said, munching. "So we go down. And who happens to be nearby and wanting to kidnap your dad—Oliver Nancarrow!"

"Wow!" Bob's eyes widened. "You think he sabotaged the plane?"

"Him or one of his men."

The boys ate silently.

“What do we do now?” Bob said finally. “We’ve got to find Dad!”

In between chews Jupiter said, “Let’s keep going. If I’m right, this valley runs south-north. And that means the logging road is ahead. Maybe we’ll meet Pete there. Or the forest service!”

“Okay. At least Nancarrow won’t come after us here. He doesn’t want to climb the cliff.”

“And maybe we can find out what’s making the Indians sick,” Jupe added.

They finished their candy bars and put the wrappers in their pockets. They’d carry them out to preserve the wilderness’s ecology.

The valley was dark. Stars sparkled overhead. Slowly a full moon rose over the high rim.

Exhausted, they continued on in the moonlight, sometimes circling boulders and thick bushes before returning to the stream. After covering at least half a mile they had to swerve inland to avoid a marshy area. Skirting the ooze took them to the valley’s wall. They had just turned back toward the river when Bob suddenly stopped, frozen to the spot. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end.

“What’s wrong?” Jupe asked quickly.

Wordlessly Bob pointed. About twenty feet ahead on the ground, something glowed eerily white.

Jupiter’s heart pounded.

“Is it w—what I think it is?” Bob stammered.

Shoulder to shoulder, they walked slowly forward. As they got closer and could see more, the glow got larger and covered more area. Slivers of the pale light spilled through surrounding grass and bushes. The light wavered as the wind blew past.

At last Jupiter and Bob stopped. Bob trembled. Jupe tried to put on a brave front, but he was shaking too.

Close to their feet was a long, silvery bone. It was the one they’d first seen in the distance.

“L—look how long it is!” Bob managed.

“A tibia,” Jupe got out. “Adult size. Looks like we found the Indians’ cemetery!”

“I would’ve been just as happy to have missed it!” Bob said fervently. “Hey, a landslide must’ve unearthed these bones. How many are there, do you think?” The bones were

scattered over a big pile of dirt that had slid off the cliff next to them. Some of the bones stuck out from the ground.

"There's the other tibia," Jupe said. "And there's a femur and some ribs and pieces of the spine." The bones glowed with reflected light from the full moon. "It looks like a complete human skeleton!"

"There's the skull!" Bob said. "Creepy!"

Big black holes formed the skull's eyes. A small black triangle was where the nose had been. The jaw hung open in a perpetual toothy grin.

"Wait a minute!" Jupe said. He picked up something glittery. It was a silver belt buckle with a large turquoise stone embedded in the center.

Bob looked. "It's just like Daniel's!"

"His uncle's, maybe," Jupe said, putting the buckle in his pocket.

"But the uncle's been gone only a month. These bones..."

"Animals could have picked them clean."

Jupiter peered at the skull. He didn't feel scared anymore. He felt sick. And very, very sad. "Check this out." He pointed to a round hole through the skeleton's cranium.

"A bullet hole?"

"Yeah," Jupiter said unhappily. "Looks to me like someone murdered him."

Pete walked on through the cold night, growing more and more tired. At last he stepped off the road and found a pine tree with thick, soft duff beneath. He wrapped his space blanket around him. Then he heard the sound of trucks. But they were heading in the wrong direction—back into the mountains from where he'd come.

Wearily he sat down. The trucks passed. Their lights were dimmed. Weird, Pete thought as he drifted off to sleep. Why drive with just parking lights?

He felt as if he'd slept hardly at all when he woke to the sound of trucks again. He looked at his digital watch. It was midnight.

He struggled to his feet. The trucks were headed the right way this time—toward the highway...and help for Mr. Andrews, Bob, and Jupiter!

He stumbled out onto the road. He waved the silvery space blanket back and forth over his head. The trucks lumbered toward him.

"Stop!" he yelled. "Stop!"

The lead truck slowed. The truck behind it slowed, too.

Excited, Pete ran up to the passenger side of the cab.

The first truck stopped. The door swung open to greet him.

He stepped on the running board and started to haul himself up into the cab.

Pete looked up. His gaze connected with the muzzle of an M-16 pointed straight at his forehead. Cold chills ran up and down his spine. He remembered Jupe's words about M-16s: "They're used for hunting people."

"Get in," runty little Biff growled. He gave a wolfish smile. "Where's your friends, boy?"

Jupiter and Bob decided they needed to rest. They wrapped themselves in their space blankets and slept on a bed of ferns upstream from where they'd found the skeleton. They made no fire, figuring there was a chance Nancarrow or one of his men might spot it.

At dawn they were up and hiking. Their stomachs grumbled, but all they had was Jupe's raw popcorn kernels and no way to cook them. They looked longingly at plants and flowers, wondering whether they were edible. But they knew the old wilderness rule—if you don't know it, don't eat it. So they stayed hungry. Jupe reminded himself of all the weight he must be losing.

They walked steadily, keeping the stream on their left. There was no path, and the going was very slow. They passed sulfur-reeking hot springs, held their breath, and ran by. Every so often they passed a patch of gray scum or multicolored oil swirling down the water.

At last they topped a rise.

They paused, feeling the first flush of hard-won success. Spread ahead was the other end of the valley, green and luminous in the noonday sun. The valley was very wide. It ended in an upward-sloping tree-dotted ridge through which the stream rushed toward them.

"A road!" Bob said, pushing his cap back on his head.

A little dirt road also entered the upper end of the valley through the stream's deep, narrow gorge. The road had been built on a lip just above the far side of the stream. The road continued toward them for several hundred yards and then ended in a flat, hard-packed dirt circle—a turnaround circle.

"That doesn't look like the logging road Mary Grayleaf described," Bob said.

"Nothing like it," Jupe agreed.

They waded across the stream. An awful stench arose. They held their breath and looked down. A black tar like substance had been caught in little pools along the stream. The vegetation around the pools was dead or dying.

They studied the placid water. It was murky and the oil slick reflected a rainbow of colors on the surface.

Quickly the guys moved on, gasping for air.

"It looks a lot like oil or asphalt, or maybe both," Bob said.

"And it stinks a lot worse."

"Hey, it reminds me of that foul mess you brewed in chem lab," Bob said, making a face.

"That happened to be a complex thermoreactive experiment," Jupe began huffily, but then he chuckled. "Remember what a fit Mr. Perry had when it blew up and splattered all over the ceiling?"

The two guys roared with laughter as they walked onto the hard-packed dirt turnaround. There were many tire tracks.

"Trucks," Bob said. He reached down and picked up a cigarette butt just like the ones Jupe had found.

Jupe nodded grimly. "Delivering 'shipments,' I bet."

"Nancarrow Trucking Company! Maybe Dad is around here somewhere!"

The two studied the polluted stream, the brush, the trees, and the ridge. Another narrow road branched off from the turnaround heading northwest as it disappeared into a wooded area of pines and birches.

"Look over there," Jupiter said.

On the southwest side of the turnaround was a series of natural caves low on the ridge. Tire tracks led across the flatlands to the caves. The guys hustled over.

"Dad?" Bob called. His mouth was dry with excitement.

They walked down the line of cave openings, but the eye-burning odor coming out of the caves was too much for them. They coughed, wheezed, and returned to where they started.

"This one doesn't smell too bad," Jupe decided, looking into the cave nearest the road.

They peered into the shadowy interior.

"I see square shapes," Bob said.

They entered and paused for their eyes to adjust to the dimness. Sunlight streamed in through the large round opening.

At last they could see. They looked around in awe. Stacked from the dirt floor to the rocky ceiling were hundreds of 55-gallon drums.

Jupe read a label. "PCBs," he said.

Bob read another. "Acids."

Jupe explored. "Alkalines, oxidizers, sulfur sludge."

The guys stared at each other in horror.

"Toxic wastes," Jupe stated.

"We've found a hazardous materials dump," Bob said.

Suddenly darkness enveloped them. They looked up at the cave's entrance. A man's dark, menacing silhouette filled the opening. They were trapped!

Chapter 14

Dirty Business

“Jupiter! bob!” the voice called angrily into the cave. “What are you doing here!” The guys looked at each other.

“Daniel?” Jupiter asked. “How’d you know it was us?” Bob said. Daniel was growing angrier. “Get out of there! This is forbidden. You’re in our sacred valley!”

“No!” Jupe countered. “You come in here. We’ll show you what’s making your tribe sick!” Daniel hesitated. He stepped into the cave. “Give your eyes time to adjust,” Jupe warned.

“This better be good,” Daniel said.

“It is,” Jupe promised. He showed their new friend the barrels. At the back of the cave one had begun to leak onto the dirt floor. Quickly they moved away from the burning fumes and outdoors into the sun. Jupiter explained what the 55-gallon drums contained.

“Toxic wastes?” Daniel said. “Poisoning our air and water?”

“Your eyes are red again,” Bob said. “Now ours are too.”

Daniel looked at the two guys. “Then the Truoc is probably not safe for drinking. Or the fish safe for eating.”

“The animals you hunt drink the water too,” Bob reminded him.

“The other caves smelled so bad that we couldn’t even go inside,” Jupiter said. “They must be full of leaking drums.”

Daniel looked grim, thinking about the quantity and the danger of the toxic materials. And then he looked furious. “Who would do this to our sacred valley?”

“Oliver Nancarrow,” Jupe said simply. “Of Nancarrow Trucking Company. Know him?”

“Of course,” Daniel said. “Our headman works for him sometimes. But Mr. Nancarrow helps our village...”

“He also hangs out around here,” Bob said. “If Nancarrow kidnapped my dad, where would he be?”

“I don’t know,” Daniel said. “I’ve never been in this end of the valley. But I’ll bet we can track him—or Mr. Nancarrow.”

As they walked back to the turnaround Jupiter asked, “Is that how you found us—by tracking?”

Daniel moved hunched over, his eyes studying the multitude of tire prints. "Grandfather released me from the singing way ceremony early this morning," he said as he paused to examine thick treads. "He was worried about you. So I borrowed Aunt's truck and found the broken-down pickup. Your shoes have patterned soles, and they are easy to follow. There were first two, then three pairs of hiking boots chasing you. You ran, had two fights, and then you guys separated from Pete. Pete got away, I think, but the boots kept after you."

"You could tell all that?" Jupiter asked, amazed.

"I knew the forest," Daniel said simply. "And Uncle taught me to track."

"Did your tracking tell you who sabotaged the pickup?" Jupe said.

"What?" Daniel asked, shocked. Jupe explained about the bolt that had been cut behind the brake pedal.

Daniel bowed his head. "Who could've done such a terrible thing?" He looked up. "I'm glad you're all right. Pete must be a great driver." The two Investigators nodded.

"Uh..." Bob said, looking at Jupe. Jupe nodded somberly. There was no way to soften the next question. "Daniel, tell us if you recognize this," Jupe said, holding out his hand. On it was the silver belt buckle with the turquoise stone embedded in the center.

Silently Daniel took the buckle. It was almost identical to the one he wore. "It's my uncle's." He looked up. "Where did you find it?"

"Back down the valley, next to the skeleton," Jupe said. "You must have seen the bones on your way up here."

Daniel closed his eyes and nodded. His jaw tightened and then relaxed.

"Now I know what my vision quest message meant," he whispered. "'In the right place, but without blessing.' Uncle's body is in the sacred valley, but his spirit hasn't been blessed from this life into the next."

The three of them were quiet a moment.

"Did you stop to look at the bones?" Jupe asked softly.

"I was too worried about you," Daniel said.

"Then I have more bad news. There was a bulk hole through his skull."

"He was shot?" Daniel said, stunned. "Who? Why?"

Bob told Daniel about the "accidental" death of Mark MacKeir and of Nancarrow's intention to kill Mr. Andrews

and the Three Investigators.

"You think Uncle found,...this?" Daniel waved his arm, encompassing the deadly caves and the road over which the toxic wastes were transported.

"Could be," Jupiter said.

Daniel thought a moment. "Grandfather learnt in the ceremony that a foreign witch was making us sick. He said the witch was filled with greed, and only by giving the witch what it wants can it be destroyed."

"Nancarrow must be the witch," Jupe said.

"But what does it mean—give the witch what it wants?" Bob asked, puzzled.

"I don't know," Daniel told them. He put his uncle's belt buckle in his pocket. "Let's find out." He pointed down at the set of wide tire tracks in the dirt. "That's Mr. Nancarrow's Winnebago." He trotted off, following the treads.

Jupiter and Bob hustled after him, astounded by what Daniel could deduce from the multitude of unclear marks in the dirt. They ran along the narrow dirt drive that curved away from the turnaround, up through thick pines and birches. Once out of sight of the caves, they slowed, proceeding cautiously.

Soon the scent of pine replaced the stench from the caves.

Daniel stopped. "There it is. Mr. Nancarrow's Winnebago. He drives it to the village sometimes to bring us presents—food, ammunition, toys for the kids."

The large, luxurious recreational vehicle was parked in an open area where the drive ended. It was out of sight of the caves and protected from the toxic fumes by the trees.

Daniel started for it.

"Wait!" Jupiter said. "Maybe somebody's there. Those guys are carrying M-16s!"

Daniel pointed to prints in the dirt. Diamond shapes filled the soles. The prints headed toward the RV.

"Do you recognize who's here?" Daniel asked.

Jupiter and Bob shook their heads.

"Pete. Everyone else has left. See the boot marks?" He pointed to other prints leaving the RV.

"They got Pete!" Jupiter cried.

They stared at Daniel, astonished and suddenly even more worried.

"Let's go!" Daniel said.

“But be careful,” Jupe warned. “Nancarrow could be nearby.”

Stooped over, the three guys ran quietly to the RV. When they reached it, they stood up slowly and peered through the windows. There were two figures inside. Pete was gagged and tied to a metal kitchen chair. Someone else was tied next to him.

“Dad!” Bob shouted.

Chapter 15

Death Trap

JUPITER AND BOB PULLED OFF THE GAGS SILENCING Mr. Andrews and Pete. “Dad, are you okay?” Bob cried. “I am now,” Mr. Andrews said with feeling. The bruise on his forehead was still enormous and the wound was fiery red. He needed a doctor. Bob promised himself that they would find one as soon as—if—they escaped this mess.

“How’d they get you, Pete?” Jupiter wanted to know as he untied Pete. The tall Investigator looked exhausted.

“I was tired and stupid and got caught,” Pete said, simplifying the situation considerably. “Biff knew a trail through the woods. He beat me to the road, and collected his wheels.”

Once free, Mr. Andrews and Pete stood up, moving their stiff arms and legs.

“Thanks, fella,” Mr. Andrews said cheerfully as he removed his blue Dodgers cap from Bob’s head.

“My pleasure,” Bob said, grinning happily at his father. Then he remembered to introduce Daniel.

Pete recovered quickly, did a few leg pumps, and headed for the RV’s refrigerator. “I’m starved,” he announced, pulling out peanut butter and bread and juice. Everyone dived on the food.

Mr. Andrews continued to walk around the cramped RV, holding on to shelves and to the backs of chairs. “Thank goodness you guys are all right. Tell me what’s happened while I’ve been”—he gestured at the kitchen chair and smiled grimly—“tied up.”

Bob related their adventures and discoveries of the last two days. “Mark MacKeir’s dead, Dad,” Bob finished. “Nancarrow killed him.”

“Actually,” Mr. Andrews said, “I believe Biff did the dirty work. He’d been tailing Mark and knew he was going to meet me. George sabotaged the Cessna’s electrical system to get rid of me. He planted a tiny explosive on an important cluster of wires behind the cabin’s fire wall.”

“He must’ve installed an electronic fuse, too,” Jupe mused with his mouth full. “That way Nancarrow could trigger the bomb from the ground.”

“Line of sight,” Mr. Andrews confirmed. “Nancarrow wanted to bring me down where he could be sure I was dead. I’d filed a flight plan, so he knew where to expect me. If I survived, all the better. Then he could find out if I’d told anyone about the story. When he discovered more people were involved—you guys—he was terrified. He had a nice half-million-dollar-a-year illegal operation thriving here and couldn’t afford an investigation.”

“He makes that much money storing hazardous chemicals?” Pete asked, astounded.

“You bet,” Mr. Andrews said, “and he’s small time. Why do you think companies all over the nation are being fined by the Environmental Protection Agency? Legal disposal is necessary but costly. Some companies will do anything to save the money and hassle. Just a couple of weeks ago, the EPA caught one Los Angeles business pouring lethal liquids straight into the city sewers.”

“Wow,” Jupe said. “That means sewage plant workers, landfills, and agricultural water could be contaminated.”

“Exactly,” Mr. Andrews said. “After that incident, the city editor assigned me to start research for a series on hazardous waste. That’s when Mark MacKeir called the newspaper and asked to talk to a reporter. At first he was so terrified of what might happen if he talked that he wouldn’t give me his name. All he said was that he worked for a chain of auto body shops and had discovered the owner was cutting costs by paying somebody shady to cart the waste away, no questions asked. You know, stuff like brake fluid, transmission fluid, drained motor oil, paint thinner. When the owner wouldn’t stop it and threatened to fire MacKeir, he followed the trucker—Nancarrow—and found his operation. MacKeir was a decent man who wanted illegal dumps to be publicized so people would understand how dangerous toxic wastes could be. That’s why he agreed to show me what was going on.”

Daniel had been leaning against the door, listening quietly. “They’re ruining our valley,” he said. “The land, the water, the animals, even the air we breathe They’re making all of us sick, and maybe they killed my uncle, too.”

“The government knows a lot about toxic cleanup,” Mr. Andrews said. “They’ll do what they can. I’m sorry about your uncle’s death. I didn’t hear any of them talk about him, so I don’t know what happened or whether they did it.”

Jupiter moved to the front of the RV. He sat in the

driver's seat. "Mr. Andrews, do you have enough information for your story?"

"I've got a good start," Mr. Andrews said. "A lot of Nancarrow's records are in his desk right here, just waiting for me to read. The RV is his office. Being on the move all the time makes him harder to catch.

"Then let's split," Pete said. "We'll take the office with us. Jupe, move over." Pete headed for the front "I'll drive."

"No, I'll drive," Mr. Andrews said, following Pete.

"You're too sick, Mr. Andrews," Pete said.

"He's right, Dad," Bob said.

"I'm fine," Mr. Andrews said. He frowned, suddenly dizzy. He grabbed the back of a chair, then sat down. "Maybe you've got a point," he admitted.

"I can't find the keys," Jupiter said. "Do you know where they are, Mr. Andrews?"

"Nancarrow must have them."

The guys' hearts fell.

"Okay. I'll jump-start it," Pete said. He headed for the door so he could work under the hood.

"Wait." Daniel's voice turned distant, commanding. He was as unmoving as he'd been in the forest when Pete had caught him. He closed his eyes, listening through the RV's open window. "There are men out there."

Quickly the five dropped down and peered over the window sills. Daniel was right. They could make out movement through the pines and birches. Movement all around the clearing. A shadowy form sometimes. Other times the mirrorlike flash of sunlight reflected from gunmetal.

"It's an ambush!" Jupiter told them, breathing hard. The others gulped.

"I see Nancarrow!" Mr. Andrews whispered suddenly.

"And that bloodthirsty pip squeak Biff," Pete added.

"That guy is dangerous," Bob said nervously. "He likes to hurt people."

"Hey, I see our headman," Daniel said, surprised. "And Ike Ladysmith."

"Ike Ladysmith works for the headman?" Jupe asked, recognizing the wiry guy as the one who had signaled Mary that the pickup was ready.

"Sometimes," Daniel said. "Look, the headman and Ike have walkie-talkies! And new rifles. I didn't know anyone in the village had such fine equipment! Our headman is an

amazing shot. For him a rifle is the greatest gift of all.”

“Ruger 10/22 hunting rifles,” Jupe identified them. He had a moment of panic. How were they going to get out of here when they were surrounded with high-powered weapons?

“Mary said your headman’s been buying things for the village,” Bob added. “Expensive things like new motor parts. And then there’s his brand-new red pickup. Maybe all his new wealth has just been money Nancarrow’s been paying him to keep quiet about this place.”

Daniel’s handsome face turned dark and stormy with disbelief. “No! He’s an honorable man!”

Tension mounted in the RV. Daniel’s anger inside was almost as bad as Nancarrow’s threat outside.

“The situation doesn’t look good,” Mr. Andrews said diplomatically, “but Daniel’s right. We don’t have enough evidence to accuse the headman...or Ike Ladysmith, either.”

“Then who loused up the brakes and almost killed us?” Pete asked.

Daniel stared at him a moment, then turned away. “I don’t know,” he said quietly.

“Well,” Jupe said, again heading for the driver’s seat, “I know one thing. We’d better figure a way out of here—pronto.”

“Any guns in this thing?” Pete asked, searching a tiny broom closet.

“Forget it,” Mr. Andrews said. “Nancarrow keeps his M-16 with him. We have to think of another way.”

Jupiter was running his hand under the dashboard and his mind was racing a mile a minute. “If Aunt Mathilda taught me one thing, it’s to be prepared. And a guy like Nancarrow has to be really prepared, especially when this RV is his office...Aha!” Jupe brought his hand out from under the dashboard. Dramatically he opened his hand to reveal a little magnetic case—the kind people store their extra car keys in. “Can you imagine his trying to make a fast getaway when he left his keys in his other pants?”

The tension in the little RV eased for a moment. Triumphantly Jupe handed the case to Pete. Pete got into the driver’s seat.

“Okay, Pete,” Mr. Andrews said. He sat down again, weak. “Take her out the way Biff brought you in. Just follow the road. If they blow the tires, keep going. Don’t let anything stop you. We’re headed for Diamond Lake!”

Bob looked quickly at his father when he heard the urgency in his voice. Mr. Andrews didn't show fear often—but this was one of those times.

Pete nodded. "Everybody down. Hold on to something."

The three guys and Mr. Andrews hit the floor of the RV. Daniel lay tense, his senses super alert. Bob wondered if he'd ever see Jennifer again, or Amy, or Debbie...Jupe gulped and prayed they'd have better luck with the RV than with the Ford pickup.

And Pete took a deep breath and turned on the ignition. The motor roared to life.

Chapter 16

Destroying the Witch

THE RV TURNED. PETE DROVE, HUNCHED OVER THE steering wheel, as small a target as possible. In one swift moment they rounded the clearing. He glimpsed astonishment on Oliver Nancarrow's broad face.

Then bullets thudded into the RV. They whined through one side and exited through the other.

"Everyone okay back there?" Pete yelled.

"Okay!" four voices shouted back.

More bullets hit the RV while others bit into the road and showered dust and dirt clods into the air.

Pete sped the RV toward the little drive that wound out through the birches and pines.

The grim, sturdy headman appeared at Oliver Nancarrow's side, enraged and talking. Nancarrow listened and swung an arm in signal for his men to stop firing. He picked his walkie-talkie from his belt and spoke.

As the RV raced past Nancarrow he did a strange thing—he smiled nastily at the speeding vehicle. Pete couldn't figure it. They were escaping. Why would Nancarrow smile?

"They're letting us go!" Pete called back to his friends.

The RV roared down the narrow, winding road, Pete's foot pressed as far down on the accelerator as he dared. Because of the curves, he couldn't see more than twenty-five feet ahead. The RV rocked from side to side, brushing pine branches.

And then he saw the reason for Nancarrow's nasty smile. Pete slammed on the brakes.

"What's going on?" someone shouted from the back.

Ahead was a large Nancarrow company truck, parked across the narrow road just where it opened into the turnaround. George or someone must have arrived to deliver a shipment. There was no way Pete could get the big RV—or even a little Volkswagen bug—around it. The truck was bumper to bumper with the trees.

"We're trapped!" Pete yelled.

The RV screeched to a halt. Nancarrow's man George stepped out from behind the truck, his M-16 pointed at Pete, his walkie-talkie swinging from his belt.

The RV's four passengers pulled themselves up to the windows.

"What're we gonna do now?" Bob groaned.

Jupe started pinching his lower lip.

"Get out here, wise guys!" George bellowed at them. "I'm gonna let you live a little longer only 'cause the boss said so!"

"Nancarrow and his men will be here soon," Mr. Andrews warned the others.

"I've got an idea," Jupe said quietly. "I'll distract George, and you guys pile out and take off."

"Move it, dipsticks!" George roared outside.

"Be careful!" Mr. Andrews urged.

Jupe nodded. He grabbed the handle of the door and paused. Then he took a deep breath and he opened the door. He put his hands to his head, holding the sides and squinting in mock pain.

"Ohhhhhh!" he moaned as he staggered out the door. "Ohhhhhh, I'm so sick!" He stumbled and staggered toward George.

George frowned. He cocked his head in suspicion. He moved the M-16 so that it covered Jupiter.

"I'm gonna die with the pain!" Jupe cried, stumbling onward. "Help me!"

"Get away!" George yelled.

Jupiter flung up his arm and "accidentally" pushed aside the M-16. "Help me!" He threw himself with despair at George.

"Blast it!"

Pete barreled out the RV's door, followed by Bob, Daniel, and Mr. Andrews.

Jupe and George collapsed to the ground, Jupe on top.

"Get off me, you fat slob!" George snarled as he tried to slide out from under Jupiter's bulk.

"They're getting away!" Nancarrow shouted from the road. "Stop them!"

Nancarrow and his men thundered toward them.

Jupiter jumped to his feet. Bob and Mr. Andrews fled into the woods. Pete raced across the dirt turn-around toward the road that led out of the valley. Daniel raced like the wind to the cab of another Nancarrow company truck. And Jupiter headed after Pete.

But the village's headman was hot after Jupiter, closing in quickly. Jupe veered off, pounding toward the caves. He

had another idea. He remembered how angry the headman had been at Nancarrow a moment ago.

Jupiter ran into the first toxic waste cave. The headman was right behind.

“Come out of there!” Amos Turner said angrily as he entered. “You have caused enough trouble. No one belongs in the sacred valley!”

“What about Nancarrow and his men?” Jupe retorted.

“They help our people! The Creator would understand. Our villagers have hard lives. Since Mr. Nancarrow rented this end of the valley, things are better!”

“The sickness hasn’t made anything better.”

“That has nothing to do with Mr. Nancarrow,” the grim headman insisted. “Now come on out!”

“Look at these barrels,” Jupe continued. “Smell the fumes? They’re filled with toxic wastes—poisons.”

The headman looked at the stacks of drums. He shook his head. “Mr. Nancarrow said he was storing explosives here. My job is to let him know when strangers come onto the reservation. He has competitors who will stop at nothing to take his business away. That is why he asked me to keep the rental, and even the walkie-talkies, secret. If he wants to store other things here too, that is none of my business.” The headman paused, then said stubbornly, “His rent is important. It makes life easier for my people!”

“But the toxic wastes are making them sick?”

The headman walked around Jupiter, pointed his Ruger rifle at Jupe’s back, and snapped out, “Go!”

“Nancarrow is the witch,” Jupiter told him as he walked through the cave’s opening into the sunlight. “And I don’t believe you really want to hurt me.”

For a moment the headman hesitated. Then he thrust his Ruger once more at Jupiter and herded him toward the turnaround where Nancarrow waited.

In the forest Ike Ladysmith patiently tracked Bob and Mr. Andrews. He would find them eventually.

Pete and Biff fought near the stream. Pete couldn’t seem to get the M-16 away from him.

“Nephew!” the headman called to Daniel.

Daniel was frantically trying to start the second truck, George had flung open the cab door and trained his M-16 on him.

“Stop that foolishness!” the headman told Daniel. “Come here now!”

Jupe saw that he and his friends were trapped. It was only a matter of time before Nancarrow would order his men to shoot Mr. Andrews and the guys. Finding out whether the guys had told anyone would no longer be worth the trouble.

With them out of the way, Nancarrow would go on polluting the valley and making the village sick. The Indians would continue looking for a witch they would never find. There would be more singing ceremonies and more messages.

Messages! During the ceremony the singing doctor had given Daniel a message: Give the witch what it wants and it will be destroyed.

Jupiter looked around. If Nancarrow was the witch, what he wanted was to capture everyone. Jupe thought about that, and slowly an idea began to form. It was a terrible risk...but they had no choice.

"Daniel! Pete! Bob! Mr. Andrews!" Jupe shouted. "Come over here. Give up!"

"Forget it!" Pete bellowed. Just then wiry Biff slammed the butt of his M-16 into Pete's stomach and knocked the wind out of him.

"No way!" Daniel said. But then Daniel realized that George's M-16 was aimed right at his heart.

Ike Ladysmith pounced in the bushes. He stood up, pulling Mr. Andrews up by the collar of his Windbreaker. Bob rose next to him.

"Come on, guys!" Jupe yelled. "We have to give up!"

Puzzled and angry, they moved toward the dirt turnaround. Nancarrow's men followed warily.

"You know Nancarrow's going to kill us," Jupe told the headman.

"He will simply throw you off our reservation," the headman said, still thinking Jupiter was exaggerating.

"Just like he had you sabotage the pickup's brakes?"

"What?" the headman asked. "I saw the pickup where you had crashed it, but I did not..." His broad, grim face was suddenly lined with doubt.

When everyone had gathered in the turnaround, Jupiter pointed to Daniel's unusual silver belt buckle. "Do you know anyone else who has a buckle like that?" he asked the headman.

"Daniel's uncle," the headman said.

Daniel took his uncle's buckle from his pocket and

handed it to the headman. "Jupiter found it down the valley," he said, "lying next to a skeleton. The skeleton had a bullet hole through its skull."

Biff froze. He turned to Nancarrow and yelled, "I told you we should've killed these guys right away just like we did the old Indian!"

Biff ran for the truck.

"Come back, you little coward!" Nancarrow shouted.

Before Nancarrow could move, the headman raised his new Ruger. A shot rang out.

Biffs M-16 flew from his hands, shot away by the headman's bullet. Pete tore after Biff.

The headman swung around, taking aim at Nancarrow.

"Wait a minute!" Nancarrow pleaded, dropping his M-16 and backing off.

"You killed my cousin!" the headman raged at Oliver Nancarrow, walking toward the frightened crook. "And now you would kill these innocent people!" He slammed the gun into Nancarrow's belly.

Nancarrow doubled up. The headman smashed his fist up into Nancarrow's jaw. For a moment Nancarrow looked surprised. Then his eyes closed and he toppled backward, unconscious.

Bob karate-kicked high. His foot connected with George's chin. He pivoted, gave another mae-geri kick, and George collapsed onto Nancarrow.

Pete grabbed Biff by the arm and spun him around. While the runty guy was off balance, Pete slammed a hard mae hiji-ate forearm into his chest.

"No! Stop!" Biff wheezed. He raised his hands.

"Please! I give up! I only did what Ollie said. I swear!"

With a disgusted grimace, Pete prodded Biff back to the others.

"I am in your debt," Amos Turner said slowly to the Three Investigators. "I did not want to believe that Mr. Nancarrow could be so evil."

"He did a great job of pretending to help your village," Mr. Andrews said.

"And it's actually the singing doctor you are indebted to," Jupe said, and explained how the shaman's message had helped him.

Daniel gazed around the clearing. "Where's Ike?"

Like a ghost, Ike Ladysmith had disappeared into the forest.

“Nancarrow must have been paying him on the side,” the headman told Daniel. “It had to be Ike who tampered with the pickup’s brakes. He almost killed your friends.”

Daniel said, “Then he’s trying to escape.”

“I will find him,” the headman said with finality. “Now we must tie up these others and put them in a truck...”

“In the RV, please,” Mr. Andrews said. “There are important documents inside that the police should see. We can drive the whole lot into Diamond Lake at the same time.”

“Of course,” the headman said agreeably. “The RV. Daniel will go with you. He will show you where the police station is.”

“What about Ike?” Pete wanted to know. “We have our own reservation police,” the headman said. “Uncle is the chief of police,” Daniel explained. “Part of our treaty with the United States government is that we take care of our own crime,” the headman said. “Reservations are entitled to that. We also prosecute our own criminals.”

“Grandfather is the judge,” Daniel added, to no one’s surprise.

They tied up Nancarrow and his two thugs and put them in the back of the RV. Turner moved the big truck out of the way. As Pete drove out, heading toward the logging road, the headman waved. He was smiling at last.

The headman leaped from the truck, walked lightly away, and disappeared into the forest.

Daniel directed them into Diamond Lake, following the route his sister Mary had described what now seemed eons ago—but was just the day before.

As they drove into the little resort town they passed glistening swimming pools, a golf course, regulation tennis courts, Western-saddle riders on prancing horses, hikers with bright backpacks, walkers in designer sportswear, handsome lodges, and luxurious hotels. A big Lear jet roared overhead into the private airstrip.

“Right on target,” Pete sighed. “Guys, we made it at last.”

“I’m starved,” Jupiter announced.

“I need a telephone,” Mr. Andrews said, “and a bath.”

“And a doctor,” Bob added, smiling.

Three girls standing on the corner noticed Bob’s magnetic smile. They waved and whistled at him.

Daniel looked puzzled. “Girls whistle at Bob? Isn’t it supposed to be the other way around?”

“Gee, what can I say, guys?” Bob asked, giving them the same dynamite smile.

Pete turned from the steering wheel and pitched one of the RV cushions at him.

Jupe jumped on top of him.

“You know,” Daniel told him thoughtfully, his handsome face solemn, “the singing doctor could cast an enchantment on you, and relieve you of the terrible responsibility of your appeal...”

“No, no! Stop!” Bob laughed. “Jupe! Get off! You may have lost weight, but not that much. No enchantments! Please. I’ll get you all dates!”

“Good,” Jupe said, rising, “and we’ll describe the case to them in complete detail. I’m sure the girls would like to know how the Sierras were formed. In fact, did you know sierra means ‘mountain range’ in Spanish? So when you say the Sierra mountains, you’re saying the Mountain Range mountains...”

Everyone else groaned as Pete pulled up to the Diamond Lake police station.

The End